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ABSTRACT

This report draws on research, statistics, and the voices of rural young people to document the extent and causes of rural child poverty, and related problems and reasons for hope in specific focus areas. About 2.5 million rural children are chronically poor. Rural poverty is concentrated in central Appalachia, the deep South, the U.S.-Mexican border, the Southwest, the central valley of California, and American Indian reservations in the Northern Plains. Child poverty is greater in rural America than in urban areas, and for different reasons. The education provided poor rural children is often inadequate and substandard; child and youth development opportunities are limited; rural children do not receive adequate health care; poor rural communities lack basic services; wages in rural areas do not lift families out of poverty; and rural jobs are less likely to offer benefits. Government funding has been directed more toward helping poor rural families survive, day-to-day, than toward creating strong community institutions that provide good physical and mental health care, education, and positive growth and development. Policy recommendations for alleviating rural poverty focus on building human capital in rural areas by providing incentives to retain educated and skilled youth and adults, training rural people, and recruiting people with the skills needed to serve children; building and supporting comprehensive community centers; strengthening the economic self-sufficiency of rural families; and finding new ways to target public and private investments specifically for poor rural children. Appendices contain references in end notes, data sources and definitions, and members of the Blue Ribbon Panel on Rural Child Poverty. (TD)

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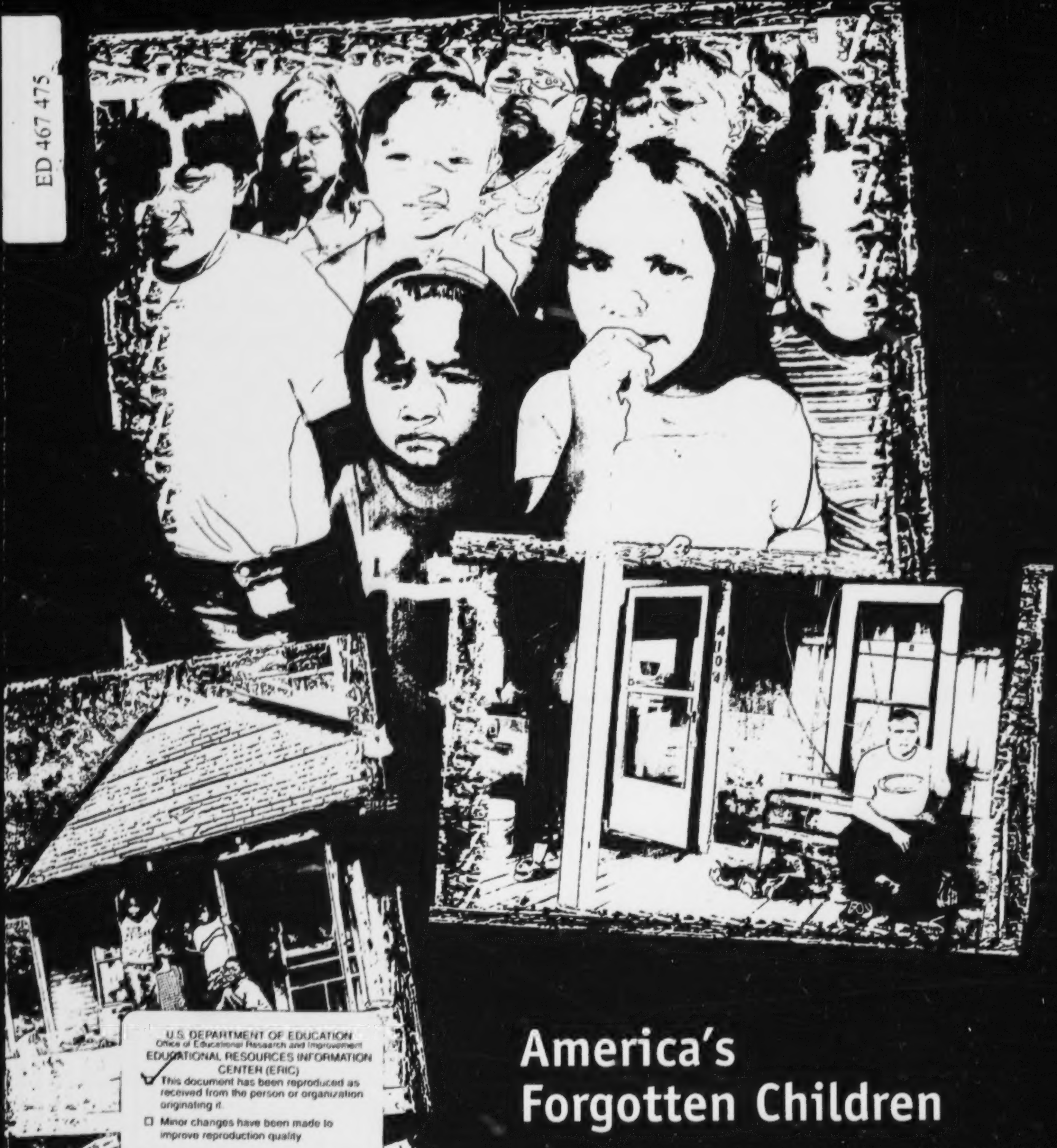

America's Forgotten Children

Child Poverty in Rural America

A Report to the Nation by Save the Children.

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America's Forgotten Children

Child Poverty in Rural America

Teen boy from Appalachian Tennessee

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America's Forgotten Children by

ANN RICHARDS

Ann Richards
Former Governor of Texas

To say that the rural poor are America's "forgotten children" assumes that most people knew about them in the first place. Amazing that there could be 2.5 million rural children living in poverty and it's a secret.

I was born in a little community outside Waco, Texas, during the Great Depression. We had real hardship, but we also had real hope. We also had leaders committed to helping people in rural areas. I still remember when they brought electricity to rural areas so that my grandmama didn't have to carry that old coal oil lamp around.

Here we are at the dawn of the 21st century and there are still towns in Texas — and around the nation — that don't have electricity. Or drinkable running water. Or telephones.

But even more troubling — there are children in persistently poor rural areas across the country living without the one thing they really need...and that is hope.

As a former governor, I know it is not easy to give them that. It means providing good day care, good schools, and good health care. It means arranging for transportation to get them where they need to go, and it means making sure their parents have good jobs that put food on the table and a roof over their heads.

It also means creating places for young people in their towns and communities where they can spend time with caring adults who will tell them they are worth something. That they deserve to go to college. And that their communities need them because they can make a difference.

I am particularly proud to serve on the Board of Trustees of an organization that has a 70-year track record working in the most hard-up rural areas of this country and abroad. Whether Save the Children is in Appalachia, American Indian Reservations, the Mississippi River Delta, or a far-away African village, the same principles apply: create support systems that will make a lasting difference in the lives of children. Whether building a well or a school, Save the Children has tailored its assistance to the needs and assets of the specific community, and sought to transfer its knowledge to the local people so they can help themselves.

That's what this report recommends: give these forgotten rural communities the help they need to help their children thrive. But Save the Children cannot do it without the active support of government, other nonprofits, businesses, foundations, and communities themselves.

We must take on this challenge before we condemn another generation to a lifetime of poverty.

Sincerely

Ann W. Richards

Ann Richards
Former Governor of Texas

America's Promise to Children by

MARC RACICOT

Marc Racicot
Former Governor of Montana
Past Chairman of America's Promise

As the former governor of Montana and in my travel across this great country, I have had an opportunity to witness great economic growth and prosperity. I have also seen firsthand the distressing impact of poverty on whole communities and those who live in them, particularly in very remote, rural communities.

We should never ignore the impact that poverty and lack of opportunity have on any of our fellow citizens. Americans everywhere believe we have a fundamental obligation to ensure that the most basic needs of children and young people are adequately addressed. As everyone knows, they are literally our future.

As a member of the Board of the Corporation for National and Community Service and as immediate past Chairman of America's Promise, I have advocated for and worked with hundreds of leaders from all sectors of our society to help provide five basic resources to all children:

1. Ongoing relationships with caring adults in their lives;
2. Safe places with structured activities during non-school hours;
3. A healthy start and future;
4. Marketable skills through effective education; and
5. Opportunities to give back through community service

This report by Save the Children provides still more statistical and real-life proof that, without these resources children, and most especially those who live in poor rural communities, are less likely to become healthy, happy, productive, and caring adults.

I applaud Save the Children for bringing the plight of rural child poverty to the forefront of public awareness. They are to be commended for their commitment to ensuring that these children are given an opportunity to live in communities where there are good schools, quality health care providers, safe places to live and learn and where their parents can provide for their basic needs. I am especially pleased that they are partnering with programs like AmeriCorps and Foster Grandparents to create and strengthen community organizations to provide both the economic and human resources necessary to make sure that no child is left behind.

I have witnessed the extraordinary power of people working together to keep children in poor rural communities in Montana safe, healthy and pointed in the direction of success. Regardless of their financial resources, these communities are rich in culture and social capital. By working together and supporting the Call to Action issued by Save the Children, I am confident that we, as citizens of one of the richest nations in the world, can replicate this success and help keep America's promise to all children.

Sincerely,

Marc Racicot
Former Governor of Montana
Past Chairman of America's Promise

Letter From Save the Children's President and Executive Director

Charles F. MacCormack
President and CEO

Catherine Milton
Executive Director, U.S. Programs

Save the Children's report on ***America's Forgotten Children: Child Poverty in Rural America*** comes at a pivotal time for our country and for Save the Children. As this report documents through research, statistics, and the voices of young people, the United States has an unfinished agenda when it comes to its most precious and vulnerable resource — its children, our future.

This report will surprise you. The voices you will hear come not from children in the poorest parts of the developing world, but from children in the richest country on earth. In the United States, 12 million girls and boys still live in entrenched poverty. Some 2.5 million of them live in rural communities, many of which lack the most basic resources for a healthy, productive life — safe drinking water, health facilities, public transportation, adequate schools, housing, and sanitation systems. Shocking as these conditions may seem, we can testify that they are real. We bear personal witness to them from our visits to hundreds of poor communities and our conversations with families determined to break out of the cycle of poverty for their children's sake.

These conditions should be unacceptable to all of us.

Solutions exist. Save the Children has 70 years of experience in developing, testing and applying these solutions to ensure a better life for children — not only in the United States but also in more than 40 countries around the world. We know that a few proven, cost-effective programs can help create real and lasting change in the lives of these children:

- **Education** — Strong learning skills and high school completion may well be the single most important factor in determining those who will escape poverty and those who will not.
- **Health** — Basic health practices and a healthy lifestyle can make the difference not just for the children themselves, but for their families and communities as well.
- **Economic Opportunities** — The skills, motivation, and opportunity to achieve economic self-sufficiency are what will give children and families a fighting chance to overcome poverty.

Because we are committed to applying the lessons we have learned and our own experience to the urgent needs of children in America, Save the Children is launching a campaign called **America's Forgotten Children.** Our goal is to bring attention and resources to the children you will meet through this report and the millions of others living in the poorest parts of rural America. Without national attention and additional resources, America's poorest rural children face very long odds.

We must act now. Millions of American children need our help, our commitment, and our energy. Their future — and ours — is in our hands.

Please join our **America's Forgotten Children** campaign to ensure that all children in the United States have the opportunity to survive, thrive, and give back to their communities and country. Visit our website (www.savethechildren.org) to learn more about how you can help.

Sincerely,

Charles F. MacCormack
President and CEO

Catherine Milton
Executive Director, U.S. Programs

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Save the Children is grateful to the many talented and committed people who contributed their time and expertise to ***America's Forgotten Children: Child Poverty in Rural America.*** We especially want to thank the following people:

Wendy Nadel, the lead writer, spent the past year researching, writing, and managing this project. Traveling to some of the poorest rural communities, she assembled important information on rural poverty through her interviews with more than 70 young people, community leaders, and experts on rural poverty. Her commitment and sensitivity were the foundation of this work.

Shirley Sagawa, a co-writer of the report, convened the Blue Ribbon Panel of experts (see Appendix A) and drew on her considerable experience and expertise in public policy in preparing the recommendations.

Dan Lichter, Robert Lazarus Professor in Population Studies at Ohio State University, led a team of demographers — Dennis Condron, Martha Crowley, Mary Marshall, and Su-Yeul Chung — who analyzed the most current data from the Census Bureau to help us understand the trends and causes of rural child poverty. A full description of their sources and definitions can be found in Appendix B. We also would like to acknowledge the important assistance on the Census 2000 tabulations from Mark Mather at the Population Reference Bureau in Washinton, D.C.

Two talented photographers, **Bob Winsett** and **Kate Lapides,** donated many days, traveling to remote parts of the country to participate in this work. Their insight, sensitivity, and belief in this project are reflected in the powerful images seen throughout these pages.

Terry Russell, Associate Vice President of US Programs at Save the Children, helped in conceptualizing and reviewing the material and offering valuable expertise.

Kathy Connolly, Director of Public Policy for Save the Children, contributed her keen sense of public policy and helped to develop the recommendations.

The members of the **Blue Ribbon Panel** contributed their time both at meetings and through thoughtful comments on this report. They are listed in Appendix A.

Sue Lehmann provided expertise in reviewing and editing the contents. Luise Erdmann, our manuscript editor, helped to sharpen and polish the text. Other staff members of Save the Children — Ann Van Dusen, Dianne Sherman, and Marie Orsini Rosen, in the home office and LaVerna Fountain, Renee Paisano-Trujillo, and Reid Livingston in the field offices — have been content experts and reviewers. Irma Presley Wilson, Alvin Smith, Clarence Hogue, George Martinez, and Eduardo Gonzales coordinated our community visits and made it possible for us to conduct thoughtful field research. In addition, Maria Martha Chavez conducted interviews and wrote material on California and Texas. Tony Klaric worked tirelessly on the report's design and production.

Most important were the people in the community, who spoke openly about their problems and allowed us to witness their daily lives.

And the young people, who openly shared their struggles and dreams, helped us to grasp the human dimension of the statistics cited throughout this publication. They inspired us to make certain that this report will be used to create the changes needed to improve their lives.

Finally, we are very grateful to The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation and The David and Lucile Packard Foundation, who share our belief that the 2.5 million children in rural America who live in poverty deserve our nation's attention. We especially thank Michael Wald of The Hewlett Foundation for both his vision and his support.

Catherine Milton
Executive Director

Boy from Huerfano, New Mexico

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Photo by Bob Winsett

There are places where one out of every six children suffers in poverty; where they can't read in school because they have no glasses; where they can't drink the water because it's contaminated; where many don't receive their basic immunizations; and where few have health insurance.

There are places where nearly half of population has no access to public transportation; where more than half of families don't have automobiles; where one in five children can't get to a doctor when they are sick because they have no way to get there; and where one in four can't call for medical help because they don't have a telephone.

There are places where children's futures are stunted by limited and substandard educational opportunities, and parent's ability to work and provide for their families is limited because they don't have child care or places for their children to go after school; where many youth turn to drugs or gangs; and where others commit suicide.

In some of these places, things are getting even worse.

You may think these children live in the poorest parts of the developing world.

They don't. They live in the backyards of rural America...in the back woods and mountains of Appalachia, on the "other side of the tracks" in the Mississippi River Delta, in shanties along the Mexican border, or in isolated American Indian Reservations of the Southwest. They are locked in remote and heartbreaking rural poverty and are America's forgotten children.

America's Forgotten Children: Child Poverty in Rural America takes you to these places, presenting the facts and faces of rural poverty and recommending solutions with a call to action to create real and lasting change. The report gives voice to the rural poor children who have long endured these conditions, who are not part of the national consciousness, and who now have their own voice... ***America's Forgotten Children.***

KEY FINDINGS

Rural America is home to 2.5 million children locked in deep poverty. Despite one of the most prosperous decades in history, 2.5 million rural children remain chronically poor. The strong economy of the 1990s did produce jobs for many rural parents — unfortunately, these jobs did not provide wages sufficient to lift their families out of poverty. And the rural poor are falling further behind. Since 1995, the average income of the wealthier rural families has risen sharply while the income of the poorest rural families has stagnated.

Rural poverty is heavily concentrated in six regions of the country. Rural poverty is most persistent and severe in six regions of the country — Central Appalachia, the Deep South, the Rio Grande border, the Southwest, the Central Valley of California, and the American Indian reservations in the Northern Plains states. In these regions, there are discrete "pockets of poverty" where the child poverty rate is two to three times the national average and where families have been locked in a cycle of poverty for decades.

Child poverty is greater in rural America than in urban areas. Of the nation's more than 200 persistently poor counties, 195 are rural. And in these counties, child poverty rates often exceed 35 percent.

In the last decade, rural child poverty has begun to mirror urban poverty. Rural poverty disproportionately affects children of color and children of single parents; rural poverty has become geographically concentrated in the same way that urban poverty is confined by neighborhoods; and rural children in poverty face the same challenges as poor urban children — substance abuse, teen pregnancy and educational failure. **But the reasons behind rural poverty are dramatically different from urban poverty.** Isolated rural communities lack the people, skills and money to support schools, libraries, community centers, child development programs, health clinics, child care centers, and public transportation systems that poor families need to change their lives. Without these essential building blocks, children in rural poor communities have little real chance of breaking free from the cycle of poverty, changing the circumstances of their lives, and following their dreams. They also have very little hope of providing a different world for their own children, who will grow up to be prisoners of the same poverty.

The Deck Is Stacked Against Poor Rural Children

- A good education is critical to escaping poverty, yet the **education provided poor rural children is often inadequate and substandard** — in part because there are too few rural teachers, and less money is spent in rural schools than urban ones.
- Children need safe places to go after school, with caring adults and constructive activities, but in rural America **child and youth development opportunities are limited** — there are few after-school, recreational, child care or early childhood development education centers.
- **Rural children do not receive adequate health care**; in fact, rural children are 50 percent more likely not to have health insurance than urban children, and 68 percent of all federally designated "health professional shortage areas" are in rural America.
- **Poor rural communities lack basic services** that people in urban areas take for granted, from safe drinking water, adequate plumbing and sewer connections to telephones and public transportation. The lack of transportation is a severe problem, limiting parents' access to employment and in many cases children's access to health care.
- Breaking the cycle of poverty and **achieving self-sufficiency are difficult in poor rural America**, where wages do not lift families out of poverty, and jobs are less likely to offer benefits.

The Reasons Rural Poor Children Have Been Left Behind

In a country with great wealth, leadership philanthropy, innovative nonprofit organizations, and world-class corporations, why have decades of strategies and programs been unable to help many rural families lift themselves and their children out of poverty?

Two siblings from Quitman County, Mississippi

Photo by Kate Lapides

Here's why:

- Government funding has traditionally been directed more toward helping poor rural families survive, day-to-day, than toward creating strong community institutions that serve children and youth with opportunities for good physical and mental health care, education and positive growth and development.
- Isolated rural areas have less access to public and private dollars than urban communities. Federal government programs and their dollars aimed at helping children and families in need do not adequately reach remote communities. Similarly, the flow of private philanthropic money to rural areas is disproportionate to the rural population and its needs.

Recommendations and a Call to Action

Save the Children calls for a new model of public-private partnerships to form a national coalition on behalf of the 2.5 million rural children trapped in poverty. Our recommendations for these partnerships to lead the way at the federal, regional, and local levels are to:

- **Build human capital**. We must train, attract, and keep people serving rural America. This means providing incentives to reverse the rural "brain drain" and keeping educated and skilled people — youth as well as adults — in poor areas; training people already in poor rural communities; and recruiting and retaining people with the skills needed to serve children.
- **Create new community institutions**. We must create, strengthen, and support comprehensive community centers that offer families and children a broad range of services, including after-school programs, mentoring, Head Start, adult literacy, and health care.
- **Strengthen the economic self-sufficiency of families**. We must ensure that welfare-to-work and other work-support policies make children a priority. Rural jobs often do not provide a high enough wage to lift families out of poverty, so we must provide resources that will enable isolated communities to help families support themselves through work.
- **Increase resources to eliminate rural poverty**. We must find new ways to target and increase public and private investments specifically for the poorest rural children.

These recommendations and our Call to Action are discussed in greater detail in this report. We are publishing separately a comprehensive plan, including legislative proposals, which will be updated periodically.

The report itself is organized in three sections:

Part One	The Challenges of Rural Child Poverty
Part Two	The Voices of Rural Children and Youth
Part Three	Call to Action

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PART ONE

THE CHALLENGES OF RURAL CHILD POVERTY

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Regardless of where they live, life is extremely hard for children growing up in poverty in the United States. Opportunities to grow and thrive are limited by inadequate education, health care, and parental work opportunities. The resulting damage can leave a deep scar on children and decrease their chances of succeeding in school, getting good jobs, and living a healthy life. Because the plight of poor children in the inner city is well-known, many Americans may be surprised to learn that for the past several decades, child poverty rates have been higher in rural than urban areas. In fact, approximately 2.5 million children live in poverty in rural America.

For children living in remote rural areas, poverty can be particularly devastating. Health care, child care, education and other key services for families can't be found in many rural communities, because they require travel to towns or cities that are hours away. But the majority of poor rural families do not own vehicles, and 40 percent of rural areas aren't serviced by public transportation.[1] One in four poor rural children lives in a house without a phone.[2] As a result of poverty and isolation, these families are extremely limited in their ability to meet their children's most basic needs.

Photo by Bob Winsett

A family at their home in Appalachian Kentucky

In more prosperous areas, community organizations can often help out when families cannot provide for children. But in isolated rural communities, the human and economic resources aren't there to support the community centers, libraries, child development programs, clinics, and youth organizations that could give children a better start. Remote communities have trouble attracting and retaining the necessary "human capital" — people with the skills, knowledge, and connections required to create the institutions that could serve their communities and build their future human capital. As a result, they cannot break the cycle of poverty that dooms future generations to a life with little possibility for success.

Rural child poverty is not a new phenomenon, but it is changing. In the last decade, it has come to mirror urban poverty in many ways. Increasingly, poor rural children belong to racial and ethnic minority groups and live with single parents. Rural poverty is becoming geographically concentrated in much the same way that urban poverty is confined to specific neighborhoods. And rural children living in poverty are facing the same challenges that their urban peers experience — such as substance abuse, teen pregnancy, and educational failure.

There is one important difference, however. Unlike poor urban children, who may live near the sleek downtown offices of affluent Americans or the dome of the Capitol, most poor rural children live in pockets of poverty that remain hidden to Americans, tucked away in the mountains of Appalachia, on the "other side of the railroad tracks" in the Mississippi River Delta, in a *colonia* along the Mexican border, or in the small communities that dot the vast landscape of the American Indian reservations. These children are rarely in the news or acknowledged in government or foundation funding debates. Most Americans have never visited these poor communities, much less known anyone who lives there, and they would be shocked to see how these children and their families live. These are truly America's forgotten children.

Fortunately, we know what needs to be done to help these children, if only the solutions were supported by the public will. The purpose of this report is to expose the problem of rural child poverty and attract the attention of those individuals and institutions that can effect change. We talk about the subject in three parts:

- ***The challenge, which lays out the scope and nature of rural child poverty;***
- ***The voices of young people living in poor rural communities; and***
- ***The way forward, which suggests four strategies and related recommendations, to help break the cycle of rural child poverty.***

Throughout this report, we feature the stories of a number of young people — some of whom are proud to be named, others who requested anonymity. These latter individuals are noted with an asterisk (•).

We begin with excerpts from an interview with Ryan•, age 17, one of America's forgotten children.

Photo by Bob Winsett

Rural New Mexico

The Voice of Ryan*

I'm in the North Side Bloods — you know us? What I used to do up until a few months ago was to deal weapons. I didn't sell much drugs because I don't like to count all that money, but my friend deals the drugs. See my bandanna and these black and blue socks? I don't have my tattoos yet. But these are all things that make members know that I'm part of the gang. Why do I want to be in a gang? I dunno. My cousins are in it. No, I don't want to be a leader. I don't believe in the government. They don't do anything to help around here, and I think that anything they do will change nothing around here.

Yeah, I go to school. Should be a senior in high school, but I'm just starting my sophomore year because I keep flunking out. I have to graduate so that I can join the Marines. So I'm trying to keep myself straight so I can graduate. The Marines are cool. You get to travel far away and see the world. I want to join the Marines to get out of here. I want to go to war. I want to fight.

It's hard to make any money legally around here. The reason we sell drugs and weapons is because we can't get jobs anywhere else. A guy goes to prison and comes out and will never get a job. I chose to sell weapons. Yeah, kids around here have lots of problems. One is they have no money. Also, this place is too far away from everywhere else. There's nothing to do around here but smoke weed. [Laugh.] Parents don't care — that's a joke — they do it too. My aunt was the first one to get me high when I was 11. There are lots of drunks around here and they drink all the time.

I live with my grandma. I don't have a dad. I mean I never met my dad. I think he's alive, though. My mom, my biological mother... I have no idea where she is. I don't care about her either. She can just go to hell for all that I care. My aunt, who I call "Mother," she's also gone. I think she's in the city or something. My mom left when I was very young. So I live with my grandma, but she's a real pain. She just talks and talks and always puts you down. So, right now I don't really live with my grandma. I just got sick of her yelling at me all the time. So I live next door to her in an old house. It's run-down, but at least I don't have to deal with her. My biological mother sometimes shows up there, usually drunk. She sleeps there, stays for a week, and then leaves again. We never know when she comes or goes or where she goes off to. I don't really give a damn about her.

Who do I look up to? I guess I look up to my uncle. He's a rebel like me. He used to deal weapons and taught me everything I know. I really owe him a lot. I still get my weapons from him. He's a real good guy. Yeah, everybody around here has weapons.

I don't want to go to college, I just want to get out of here. I want to live anywhere but here. Dreams? [Laugh.] I don't have many dreams. But I would do anything for money. Money talks. [Laugh.] I guess I really need to get out of here.

Rural Pockets of Poverty and the Inner Cities: A Shared Destiny

Gangs, drugs, alcohol, weapons, a broken family, no positive role models — Ryan's story mirrors that of a poor inner-city teenager. Yet Ryan lives in an isolated rural community where flat landscape and dirt roads littered with beer bottles are as bleak as the crumbling buildings and back alleys of any poor urban neighborhood. The presence of gangs dominates the landscape, as shown by the graffiti on the water tower, the only large physical structure for miles. Despite their differences, the poorest inner-city neighborhoods and rural pockets of poverty are in fact very similar. Yet, as we show later, the solutions necessary to break the cycle of poverty are quite different in rural areas.

Myths and Realities About Rural America

Stereotypes about life in rural America cause us to ignore or downplay the harsh realities that exist for millions of children.

MYTH: The percentage of children living in poverty is greater in urban than in rural America.

REALITY: Child poverty is greater in rural America: 16 percent of children in metropolitan areas live in poverty compared to 20 percent of children living in nonmetro communities (see definition, page 19).[3] Of the 200 persistently poor counties (those with a 20 percent poverty rate or higher), 195 are rural.[4]

MYTH: Rural children enjoy a healthier life than urban children.

REALITY: Many measures of child well being show that rural children are at a disadvantage compared to other groups. They do not receive the same level of preventive health care; death rates for both rural children and young adults are higher; and suicide rates for males are dramatically higher (see page 32). The rural poor have greater long-term health problems and less access to health care than the poor in urban America.[5]

MYTH: Rural children live in cleaner and healthier environments than urban children.

REALITY: Rural communities can be dumping grounds for toxic wastes and pollutants; large, hazardous waste disposal facilities and huge power plants are increasingly part of the landscape. As a result, children are exposed to many air and water toxins that profoundly affect their health, and in many rural communities, it is not advisable to drink the water.

MYTH: Substance abuse is an urban problem, not a serious issue for rural children.

REALITY: In 1999, rural 10th- and 12th-graders were more likely than their urban peers to use drugs (other than marijuana and ecstasy). And rural 8th-graders were 29 percent more likely to have used alcohol in the previous month and 50 percent more likely to have used cocaine in the previous year than 8th-graders in metro areas.[6]

MYTH: Gangs are an urban phenomenon.

REALITY: Gangs are prevalent in many rural areas, particularly in Central California and on the American Indian reservations. In 1997, tribal police reported 75 active gangs in the Navajo Nation.[7]

MYTH: Rural communities are becoming important growth areas for economic development.

REALITY: There are few growth industries in rural America aside from tourism and second homes, which drive up the cost of living, and prisons and hazardous waste disposal sites, which decrease the quality of life.

MYTH: Most rural children live on farms.

REALITY: Fewer than 10 percent of rural Americans live on a farm, and only 7.6 percent of the rural workforce is employed in farming.

A neighborhood in the Central California Valley

Photo by Kate Lapides

What Do We Mean by Rural?

The US Census Bureau defines rural as "places with fewer than 2,500 residents and open territory." The Office of Management and Budget (OMB), on the other hand, does not use the term rural but rather a county designation - "non-metropolitan" (nonmetro) - which refers to counties "outside the boundaries of metro areas and having no cities with as many as 50,000 residents."

Because we use statistics from both the Census Bureau and OMB, we use both terms, rural and nonmetro, in this report, depending on the source of the data. This can make comparison difficult, and it points to the great need for a uniform definition that can be used by all agencies and institutions concerned with geographic differences.

The Scope of Rural Child Poverty

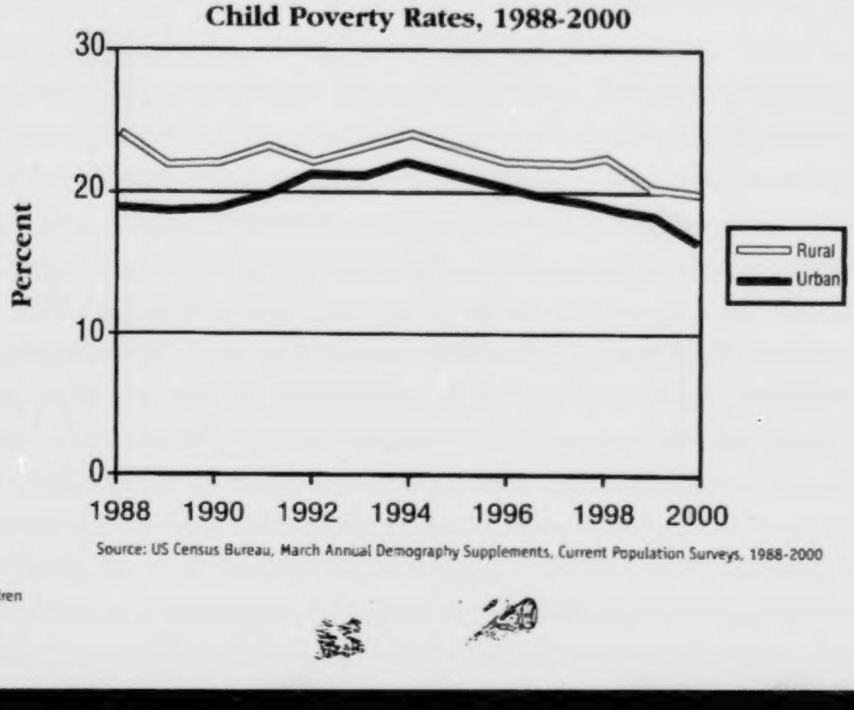
National child poverty rates decreased from 20 percent in 1988 to about 16 percent in 2000, after one of the most prosperous decades in history. Statistics for rural areas alone also show a modest decline in child poverty since the rates peaked in the early 1990s. Despite the improvement in the percentages, however, more rural children were living in poverty in 2000 than in 1988, due to the growth in population. Approximately 2.5 million children in rural America – one in six – remain poor.

Statistics Hide America's Forgotten Children[8]

Child poverty rates have been worse in rural America than in urban areas, and this situation hasn't changed much over the past decade as can be seen in Figure 1. Because these are national figures, they mask the persistent economic hardship found in historically poor counties, where child poverty rates often exceed 35 percent. Figure 2 lists the 100 poorest rural counties in America.

Below the county level, many "pockets of poverty" exist where well over half of the children live below the poverty line. Because of the way information is collected and tabulated, no statistics are available that adequately demonstrate how serious this situation is. "Pockets of poverty" is not an official term. We use it to describe the unofficial geographic regions throughout rural America that are characterized by extreme poverty. These areas are buried in the county statistics of the US Census Bureau; they are hidden in part because they are included in the statistics of other, wealthier communities in the county. All the communities described in this report are considered "pockets of poverty," and the living conditions are actually much worse than the data suggest.

Figure 1



Source: US Census Bureau, March Annual Demography Supplements, Current Population Surveys, 1988-2000

Figure 2

America's Poorest Rural Counties, 1999

Ranking	County Name Equivalent	State	Child Poverty (%)	Ranking	County Name Equivalent	State	Child Poverty (%)
1	Buffalo County	SD	61.8	51	Issaquena County	MS	43.2
2	Ziebach County	SD	61.2	52	Quitman County	MS	43.2
3	Shannon County	SD	61.0	53	Yazoo County	MS	43.1
4	Starr County	TX	59.5	54	Apache County	AZ	43.0
5	Todd County	SD	57.7	55	Walthall County	MS	42.8
6	East Carroll Parish	LA	56.8	56	McKinley County	NM	42.6
7	Owsley County	KY	56.4	57	Knox County	KY	42.5
8	McDowell County	WV	53.0	58	Catahoula Parish	LA4	2.4
9	Madison Parish	LA	52.6	59	Bell County	KY	42.1
10	Holmes County	MS	52.4	60	Willacy County	TX	42.1
11	Brooks County	TX	51.8	61	Concordia Parish	LA	42.1
12	Wolfe County	KY	51.5	62	Crisp County	GA	41.9
13	Humphreys County	MS	50.5	63	Roosevelt County	MT	41.8
14	Sharkey County	MS	50.4	64	Lowndes County	AL	41.8
15	Perry County	AL	49.2	65	Lee County	KY	41.8
16	Wilkinson County	MS	49.2	66	Franklin Parish	LA	41.6
17	Zavala County	TX	49.0	67	Hudspeth County	TX	41.4
18	Bennett County	SD	48.8	68	McCreary County	KY	41.4
19	Corson County	SD	48.8	69	Terrell County	GA	41.1
20	Wilcox County	AL	48.5	70	Dallas County	AL	41.0
21	Tensas Parish	LA	48.3	71	Menifee County	KY	40.8
22	Leflore County	MS	48.2	72	Claiborne County	MS	40.8
23	Allendale County	SC	48.1	73	Maverick County	TX	40.7
24	Clay County	KY	47.8	74	Lawrence County	KY	40.6
25	Sumter County	AL	47.7	75	Red River Parish	LA	40.5
26	Edwards County	TX	47.4	76	Harlan County	KY	40.4
27	Luna County	NM	47.1	77	Dimmit County	TX	40.3
28	Jackson County	SD	46.3	78	Menard County	TX	40.3
29	Zapata County	TX	46.2	79	Knott County	KY	40.2
30	Coahoma County	MS	46.1	80	Floyd County	KY	40.1
31	Mellette County	SD	46.0	81	Jenkins County	GA	40.0
32	Magoffin County	KY	46.0	82	Menominee County	W	139.9
33	Jefferson County	MS	46.0	83	Clifton Forge City	VA	39.8
34	Webster County	WV	45.7	84	Sunflower County	MS	39.8
35	Phillips County	AR	45.6	85	Desha County	AR	39.7
36	Martin County	KY	45.4	86	Hall County	TX	39.7
37	Hancock County	GA	45.4	87	Richland Parish	LA	39.6
38	Sioux County	ND	45.2	88	County	ND	39.5
39	Bullock County	AL	45.0	89	Lee County	AR	39.5
40	Macon County	AL	44.1	90	Evangeline Parish	LA	39.5
41	Greene County	AL	44.1	91	Talbot County	GA	39.4
42	Tunica County	MS	44.1	92	Catron County	NM	39.4
43	Clay County	GA	44.0	93	Leslie County	KY	39.3
44	Bolivar County	MS	44.0	94	Mingo County	WV	39.3
45	Socorro County	NM	43.9	95	Macon County	GA	39.2
46	Tallahatchie County	MS	43.8	96	Calhoun County	GA	39.2
47	Noxubee County	MS	43.7	97	Benson County	ND	39.2
48	Pemiscot County	MO	43.6	98	Burke County	GA	39.2
49	Breathitt County	KY	43.5	99	Alexander County	IL	39.1
50	Presidio County	TX	43.4	100	Hidalgo County	NM	38.9

Source: Population Reference Bureau analysis of data from 2000 US Census Bureau Demographic Profiles: 100 Percent and Sample Data

SNAPSHOT: Starr County, Texas: One of America's Poorest Counties

Starr County – along the Mexican border – is one of the poorest counties in the country, in one of the nation's poorest regions, the Rio Grande Valley. It is dominated by *colonias*, poor neighborhoods built as temporary housing for migrant farm workers during the 1950s. Approximately 1,500 *colonias* are concentrated along the Mexican borders of Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, and California. These poor rural neighborhoods are quite similar to urban ghettos, with high concentrations of minorities, low average income, high unemployment and underemployment, substantial neighborhood instability (i.e., transient or highly mobile populations), high crime rates (especially in drug trafficking), illiteracy, and high rates of teen and out-of-wedlock childbearing.

Roughly 8,000 to 10,000 people live in *colonias* outside Rio Grande City; another 3,000 to 5,000 live in two-to-three dozen other *colonias* throughout the county. Starr County has been buffeted by periodic fluctuations in the oil industry, which has been a major economic force in the area. Agriculture and ranching are the major industries. Many *colonia* migrant farm workers and their children follow the harvest season in and beyond the county.

2000 Population	**53,597 (vs. 40,518 in 1990)**
Hispanic population	**98% (vs. 32% for Texas)**
Population under age 5	**10.4% (vs. 7.8% for Texas)**
Children age 0–17 living in poverty (1999)	**59.5%**
High school graduates or higher (25 or older in 2000)	**34.7% (vs. 75.6% for Texas)**
College graduate or higher (25 or older in 2000)	**6.9% (vs. 23.2% for Texas)**
Civilian unemployment rate (2000)	**20.9% (vs. 6.1% for Texas)**
Median household income (1999)	**$16,504 (vs. $39,927 for Texas)**
Persons per household (2000)	**3.7 (vs. 2.7 for Texas)**
Households headed by females with children (2000)	**9.9% (vs. 7.3% in Texas)**
Foreign born (1999)	**36.9% (vs. 13.9% in Texas)**
Receive public assistance (1999)	**16.1% (vs. 3.2% in Texas)**

Source: US Census Bureau, State and County Quickfacts, 2000

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The economic boom of the 1990s did not greatly improve the lives of poor rural children.

Welfare reform and a strong economy have put more rural parents back into the workforce. Yet in many rural areas, decline in the "welfare poor" has been replaced by an increase in the "working poor," with no real improvement in living conditions. The wages of rural workers are often not sufficient to lift their families out of poverty.

In addition, over the last decade, poor rural children have fallen increasingly below the living standards enjoyed by rural children from families of average income. While incomes of wealthier rural families rose sharply, especially after 1995, the average income of the poorest rural families remained flat. In 2000, for example, the income of the richest 20 percent of rural families with children was about seven times greater than the poverty level. In contrast, the average income of the poorest 20 percent of rural families with children was well below the poverty level. Statistics show that many rural children, especially minority children, are disadvantaged economically and in other important areas of well being.

Did You Know...

According to the Census Bureau's Current Population Survey from March 2001, to be considered "poor," a family of four earned $17,601 or less in 2000, compared to the median family income of $50,892 that year.

Why Are Most Americans Unaware of Rural Child Poverty?

While the tragedy of urban poverty is well-known, we rarely hear about poor rural children on the news or in the myriad reports published each year on issues concerning child poverty. These poor rural regions are geographically removed from most major cities, located off major transportation corridors and they typically are not part of the national public policy dialogue about economic development strategies, anti-poverty programs, or welfare reform. It is not surprising, therefore, that rural children – especially poor rural children – are not uppermost in the public mind. Instead, most Americans continue to believe that child poverty is largely an urban problem.

Furthermore, shortcomings in the current research on rural areas make it difficult to document a case for the dire situation of their children. First, because research efforts are not based on a standard definition of rural, statistics are often inconsistent. Second, information about the best practices in the field of youth development comes mainly from research on urban and suburban youth.[9] Rural children have not been well-researched, and the limited research makes it hard to design appropriate interventions. Third, the proximity of this poverty to relative affluence masks child poverty in many small rural areas. In rural counties in Appalachia and the Mississippi River Delta, for example, it is common to find the most dilapidated homes down the road from new, expensive housing developments. As a result, when wealthy retirees and farmers live in the poorer counties, they skew the true level of poverty. Because of inadequacies in the way the data are analyzed and reported, we must pay particular attention to how the research is conducted, taking into account the particular challenges of each region. Also, more research focused on the poorest rural children and families is essential to understand their needs.

Rural child poverty is concentrated in six geographic regions of the country.

There is a troubling and growing concentration of poverty in six regions of the country. The US map (Figure 3) highlights areas where rural child poverty is most persistent and severe. The darker-colored regions — Central Appalachia, the Deep South, including the Mississippi River Delta, the Rio Grande border, the Southwest, the Central Valley of California, and American Indian communities in the Northern Plains — are those with the highest child poverty rates, looming from two to more than three times the national average.

In these regions, the worst poverty often exists in smaller culturally and economically distinct areas, some of which have been mired in poverty for decades. This is similar to the "ghettos" in major US inner cities, where urban child poverty is concentrated.

A disproportionately large percent of poor rural children belong to racial minority or ethnic groups.

In 2000, more than 50 percent of poor rural children were minorities. In rural areas, roughly 33 percent of Hispanic children, 37 percent of African American children, and 44 percent of American Indian children lived below the poverty line.

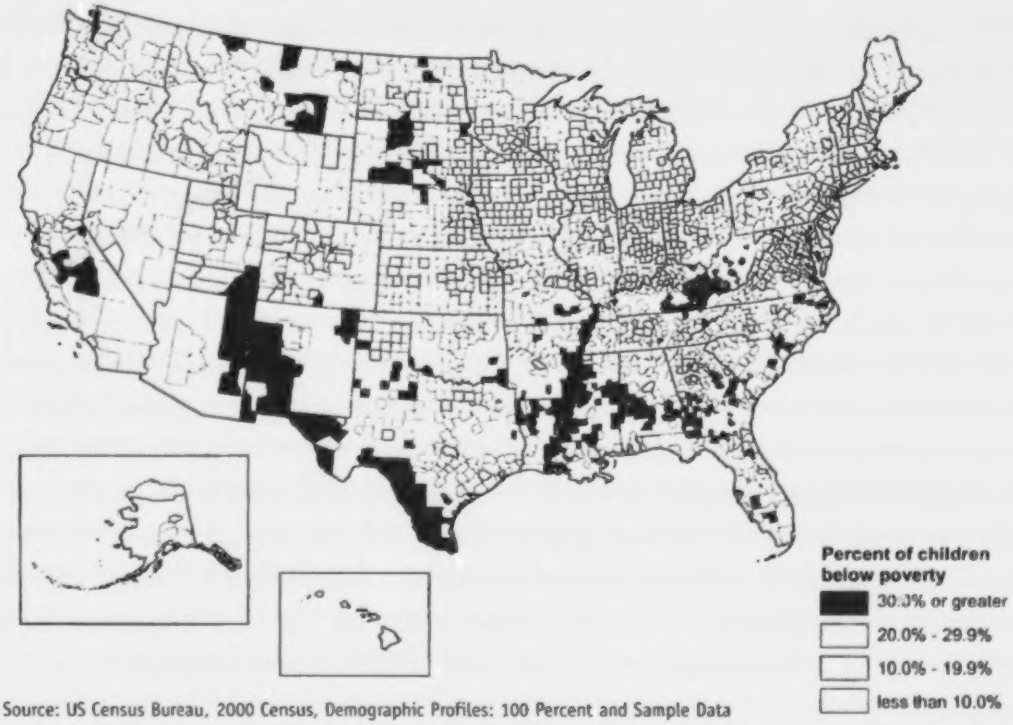
The racial breakdown of poor rural counties sheds light on the changing racial landscape in rural America. The border counties of Texas and the Central California Valley have a heavy concentration of Hispanics — mostly families or the children of families who have come from Mexico. Approximately 45 percent of the children are second-generation immigrants and almost 30 percent live in poverty. People of Mexican origin have immigrated to many other rural parts of the United States as well — one of the new and unexpected demographic trends of the 1990s. The large influx of Hispanics in some rural communities (e.g., agricultural laborers or workers in meat packing or food processing plants) is changing the social and economic fabric of small town America. Bilingual education, the provision of social services, governance issues, and cultural and economic assimilation will clearly become a part of policy dialogue. At issue is whether immigrant children will ultimately be fully incorporated into the economic and social mainstream of American life or, instead, remain disproportionately poor as they grow into adulthood. In the past, these issues applied mostly to the nation's largest cities. Today, they confront many, largely unprepared rural communities.

The situation for other poor rural minority children is different than that of Hispanic children. Although many communities in the Mississippi River Delta and the rural South are racially mixed, poor children tend to be mostly native African Americans. Poverty rates, although still extremely high in many rural African American communities, have nevertheless declined considerably over the past decade (Figure 4). In some cases, this decline reflects the trend to move out of rural areas, an important component of the continuing urbanization of America's African American population. Rural poverty has migrated to the city, and the destinies of America's rural and urban African Americans are inextricably linked.

The children on the American Indian reservations are, of course, predominantly American Indian. In rural Todd County, South Dakota, for example, 87 percent of the population in 2000 was American Indian. The 2000 Census shows that 57.7 percent of the children living there in 1999 were poor. The only historically poor region with a dominant white population (95 percent) is central Appalachia, which encompasses parts of southeastern Ohio, eastern Kentucky, West Virginia and Tennessee. While the overall economic signs are somewhat hopeful, reductions in poverty, improvements in education, and new job opportunities have taken place primarily in urban employment centers, bypassing the poor rural communities. Although the degree of poverty has decreased for children of color in rural America, the poverty rates for poor white children have remained relatively steady, at approximately 19 percent, since 1988 (Figure 4).

Figure 3

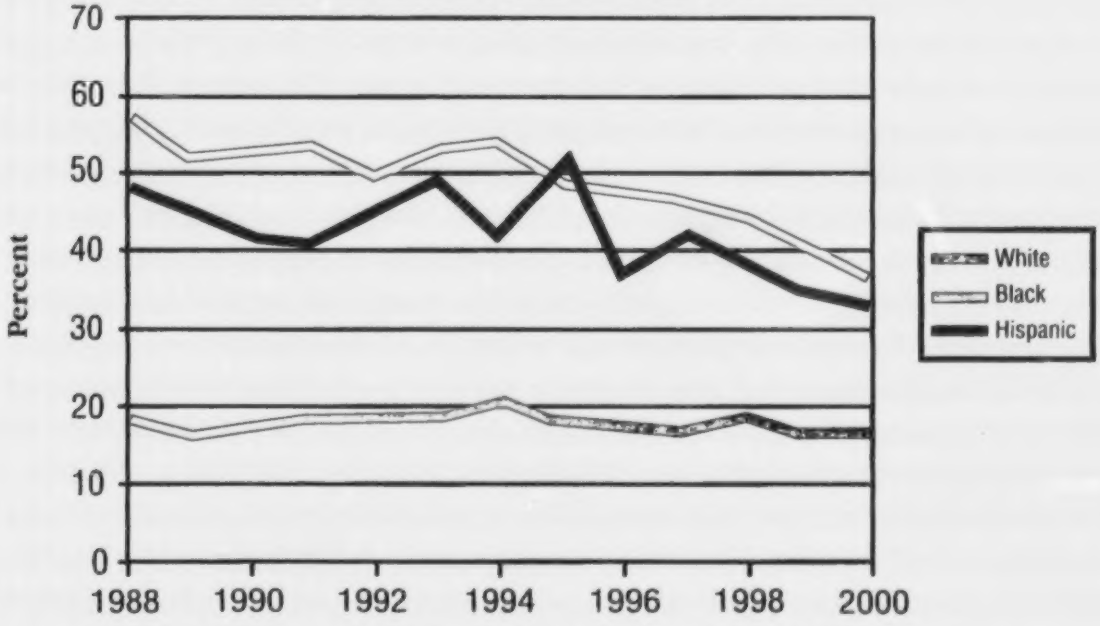
Child Poverty Rates in US Counties 1999


Percent of children below poverty
30.0% or greater
20.0% - 29.9%
10.0% - 19.9%
less than 10.0%

Source: US Census Bureau, 2000 Census, Demographic Profiles: 100 Percent and Sample Data

Figure 4

Rural Child Poverty Rates, 1988-2000



Source: US Census Bureau, March Annual Demography Supplements, Current Population Surveys, 1988-2000

A high percentage of poor children live in female-headed families.

Rural children, like urban children, have not been immune to ongoing changes in the American family over the past few decades. Rural trends in divorce, out-of-wedlock childbearing, and the number of female-headed households have been quite similar to urban trends. As a result, the poor rural family today frequently looks much like the poor urban family — headed by single mothers. Approximately 28 percent of all rural children and 31 percent of urban children in 2000 lived in single-parent households.

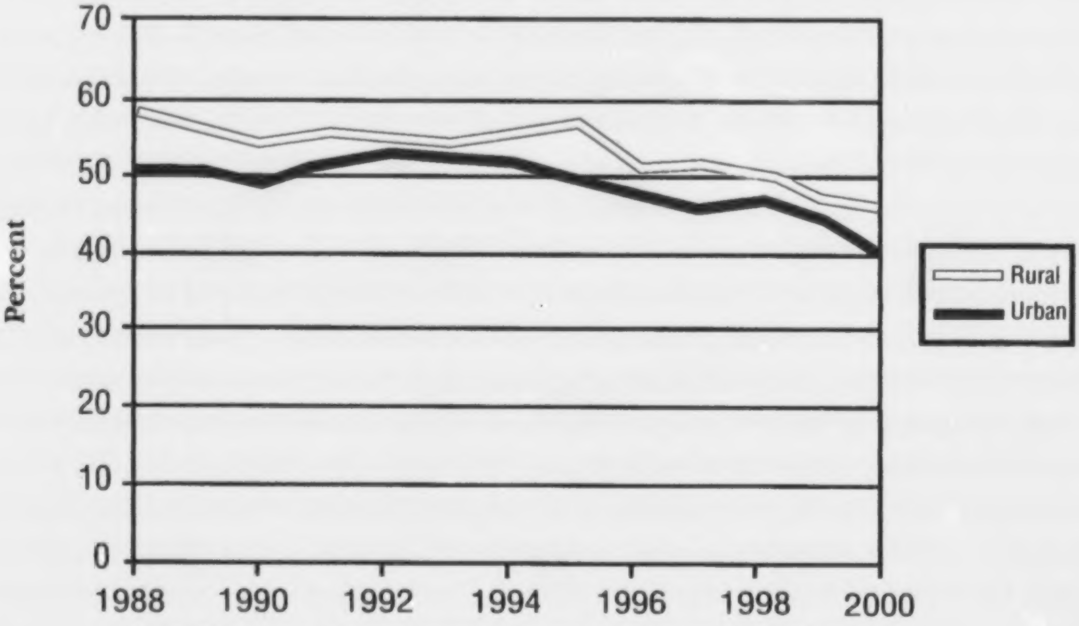
A growing problem is poor children often living in "at risk" single parent households. Since the passage of the 1996 welfare bill, poor single mothers have entered the labor force in record numbers. While they earn an income, they receive significantly less cash assistance from welfare programs.

Although poverty rates among female-headed families have declined, children of rural single mothers remain among the poorest demographic group in the country. Approximately 46 percent of rural children living with a single mother are poor compared with 39 percent of urban children (Figure 5). Today, as in 1988, poor single mothers need to double their income, on average, to escape poverty.

In 1999, 55 percent of poor single rural mothers were working, a dramatic rise from 1989, when only 35 percent worked. The implications for their children are unclear; many rural communities face shortages of formal child care providers and children often are left unsupervised. Although welfare reform has moved many single mothers into the workforce, the fact they are employed does not mean they are earning enough money to break out of poverty, especially when work-related expenses, such as transportation costs and child care, are taken into account.

Given this situation, it is not surprising that 25 percent of single rural mothers doubled up or lived with another family in 1999. This number is more than twice what it was in 1989 — a significant demographic shift in the rural household.

Figure 5 **Child Poverty Among Female-Headed Families, 1998-2000**



Source: US Census Bureau, March Annual Demography Supplements, Current Population Surveys, 1988-2000

**Navajo child,
Crownpoint, New Mexico**

Photo by Michael Bisceglia

The Challenges for Rural Children

In the previous section, we examined the scope of rural child poverty. The following section describes the many challenges that rural children face:

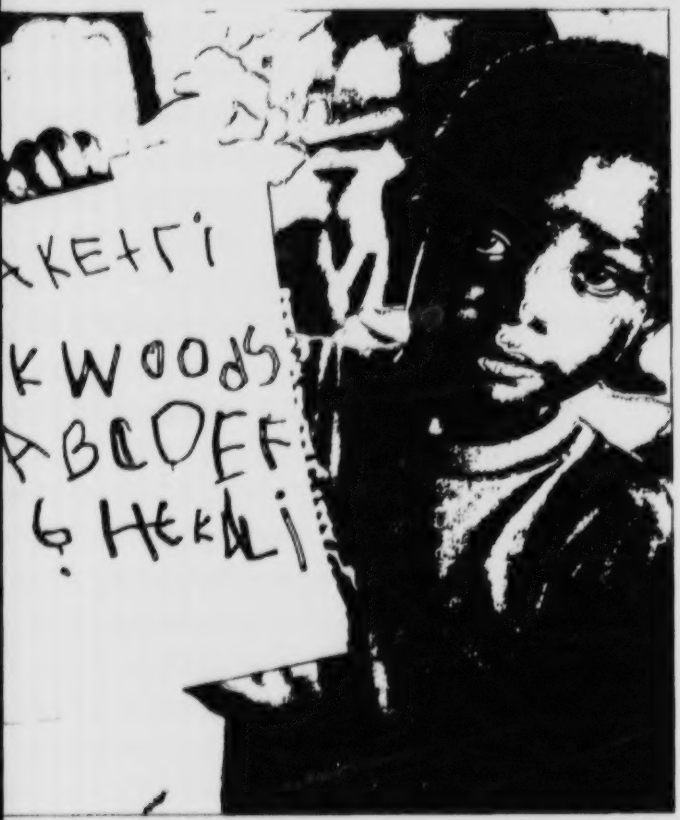
- Education is often substandard.
- Child and youth development opportunities are limited.
- Health care is inadequate.
- Transportation is limited and other physical infrastructures are weak.
- Family self-sufficiency is hard to attain.

Education is often substandard in rural pockets of poverty.

> ***"There is no cultural sensitivity whatsoever in the schools here. Racism is rampant. A large majority of our teachers are white in a mostly black school, and many of them are not familiar at all with the black culture. At our tutoring program, the kids do the work and do it well. And they go back to school and get D's and F's, and after many conversations with teachers, we still can't figure this out. And then there's the medication. You wouldn't believe how many black children in our schools are put on medication. They say that the kids need it, but I know it's because they just can't control them."***
>
> — Roberta Dunn,* director of youth center, rural community, Arkansas

A good education is one of the most important assets in overcoming the damaging impact of poverty. Yet,

- There is less money per student spent on education in rural America. According to a Department of Education survey in 1995–96, public school districts that serve metropolitan areas spent a total of $7,010 per year per student. In rural public school districts, this expenditure was $5,302. Almost $2,000 more per student was spent annually on instruction in metropolitan areas.[10] In 1998–99, 40 percent of US public schools were in rural and small towns and enrolled 26 percent of public school students, yet they received only 23 percent of federal education dollars.[11]
- Rural students fall behind their urban and suburban peers in high school, and fewer rural adults older than 25 hold a college degree than do urban adults (16 vs. 28 percent).[12]
- The number of rural school districts has decreased even though the number of young families has increased. Of all the school consolidations between 1986 and 1993, 59 percent were in small rural districts. Research on school size demonstrates that large schools tend to be less effective (see page 29).
- Racial segregation is a strong force in many rural school districts, particularly in the Mississippi River Delta and the rural South. It is common to find public schools that are 98 percent black and private schools that are 100 percent white.



A kindergartner from Quitman County, Mississippi

Photo by Kate Lapides

Did you know . . .

Low-income rural students face multiple barriers that widen the digital divide.

Technology Counts 2001 **concludes that some groups of students miss out on the opportunities afforded through technology. Not surprisingly, these groups include poor children, minorities, low achievers, students learning to speak English, and children in rural communities. Many poor rural children fit into several of these categories.[13]**

The School Consolidation Debate

School consolidation is one of the biggest issues confronting small rural communities. The trend in many states has been to close small community schools and move students to bigger schools, which are often a long bus ride away. It's believed that by pooling both financial and human resources, the schools will be able to offer a broader curriculum, better teachers, and more enrichment opportunities. On the other side of this debate is a concern that school consolidation may inadvertently have a negative effect on poor rural children and their families.

A recent study by the Rural School and Community Trust of 2,290 districts in four states argues that small community schools offer poor students the best opportunity to achieve.

- Large schools compound the negative effects of poverty; small schools blunt these effects by as much as 80 percent.
- The negative impact of large school size affects many more poor students than the positive impact affects affluent students.
- In large schools, socioeconomic status accounts for approximately 25 percent of the variation in achievement test scores; in small schools, it accounts for only one to four percent of the variance. On average, smaller schools cut the relationship between socioeconomic status and achievement in half compared to larger schools.
- As grade levels increase, the effect of school size on achievement increases.
- The poorer the community, the smaller a school should be to maximize its performance on standardized tests.

This study builds an argument for why the large, countywide schools in many rural states are inadvertently placing poor children at greater risk.[14] In determining whether to consolidate, and if so, where, when and how, the effect on poor rural children must be kept in mind.

Child and youth development opportunities are limited.

Rural youth have fewer safe places with caring adults and constructive activities after school.

"Kids need people who have the patience to explain things and do projects with them, like planting things, and just to listen to them. And kids need stuff to do because all they do is sit around and watch TV all day. People say that because we don't have anything to do we find problems. But really it's all because we don't have anywhere to go to after school."
— Rosaria Sandoval, age 16, Farmersville, California

It is important for young people to have safe places to go after school, with caring adults and constructive activities that enable them to develop interests, skills, and self-esteem. Yet,

- Fewer nonprofit organizations, after-school programs, mentoring programs and other community resources are available in poor rural areas.
- Isolated areas rarely have community centers or other safe places where young people can go and spend time with volunteers and staff who could provide ongoing support.
- Rural schools are less likely to offer extended-day and after-school programs.[15] And school consolidation in the 1980s and 1990s has left many young people with no place to go near their homes and nothing to do after school.
- Opportunities available through sports and school-based after-school programs and activities are often not available for rural youth due to the distance between school and home.

"It's hard for kids like me who live in the mountains. There's really not much for kids here to do. The nearest movie theater or bowling alley is in Hazard [County], which is almost 30 miles away. We don't even have stores around here. After school, there's not much happening for kids, and this is why some kids get into trouble."
— Hope Grigsby, age 16, Lotts Creek, Kentucky

Rural youth have fewer formal opportunities to give back through community service.

"During the school year, I was one of 12 juniors and seniors who spent time with the kids. I usually take out about five kids each week. We play flag football or go on trips or something. It's kind of like being a big brother. We help them out with problems, or if they need tutoring. I think this helps out a little. And I like doing it."
— Craven Cook, age 19, Marks, Mississippi.

The opportunity to lead and to make a difference in other people's lives is a powerful and often life-changing experience for young people. The experience of having a voice and the ability to create change can transform a life beaten down by poverty into a life filled with hope and dreams. Yet,

- With fewer adults to participate in the lives of young people and fewer places to go after school, it is difficult for many children to participate in community service programs.
- Rural schools are less likely than urban or small town schools to provide service-learning opportunities (27 percent rural, 36 percent urban, 43 percent small town).[16]

Photo by Kate Lapides

Playing at the Chapter House, Huerfano, New Mexico

Photo by Bob Winsett

Service-Learning

Service-learning — community service that is integrated into an educational curriculum — can be the cornerstone of an agenda to develop future leaders while building the community. Service-learning projects, often supported by federal "Learn and Serve" funding from the Corporation for National and Community Service, help to build skills while teaching young people the value of civic participation. School-based and out-of-school service-learning programs can have important and lasting effects. First, service-learning is a critical link to academic knowledge (what students know) and performance (what students are able to do.) Second, the work of the young people may be of great benefit to the community. Third, well-structured opportunities have been shown to improve educational motivation, reduce risky behaviors that lead to teen pregnancy, substance abuse and addiction, and build participants' self-esteem. And finally, service-learning can also strengthen young people's ties to the community and give them a stake in its success — a powerful motive for them to stay or return in the future.

Hope Grigsby holding a water sample she tested as part of a service-learning environmental project in her high school in Lotts Creek, Kentucky

34

Health care is inadequate.

"The doctor said Kyle [age 4] is just very slow. They can't seem to find out what's wrong. Even though he can't talk and has trouble seeing right, I guess he'll eventually be okay. He's probably just a bit slow for his age."*

— John Wells,* father, Cowan, Kentucky

Rural children do not receive adequate health care and fare poorly on several important indicators of child well being.

- Rural America is severely underserved by health care specialists, dentists, and other health services. As of June 2001, 68 percent of all federally designated Health Professional Shortage Areas were rural and affected close to 25 million people.[17]
- Sixty percent of all rural residents live in federally designated Mental Health Professional Shortage Areas.[18] This serious shortage of doctoral level mental health professionals means that many people are served by primary care doctors who are not trained to diagnose and treat mental illness and behavioral disorders.
- Rural children are up to 50 percent more likely not to have health insurance than urban children and to have more consistent periods when they are not insured. In 2000, 3.1 million rural children were not insured.[19] Some 1.7 million of them are eligible for the State Child Health Insurance Program (SCHIP) but are not enrolled. And 60 percent of parents with children who qualify for SCHIP don't know that the program is available.[20]
- Rural adolescents smoke and drink more than their urban and suburban peers and have a higher incidence of drug use (different drugs at different ages).[21] In 1999, 19 percent of adolescents in rural counties smoked compared with 11 percent in metro counties.[22]
- The death rates for children and young adults (ages 1–24) are highest in the most rural counties. In all regions except the Northeast, the 1996–98 death rates for children and young adults in the most rural counties were more than 50 percent higher than those in metro counties.[23]
- In 1996–98, the suicide rate for males older than 15 was nearly 80 percent greater in rural counties than in large metro counties.[24]
- A high percentage of rural children and young people are overweight as a result of less nutritious, high-fat diets in many poor areas. Obesity is an important risk factor for many health problems, including high blood pressure, diabetes, and high cholesterol. Yet culture can play a big role in diet; while it may not be always healthy, food can have historical and cultural significance and provide comfort and familiarity.

Living Conditions Take Toll on Children

Tuluksak and Hooper Bay, Alaska, are Yup'ik Eskimo villages; and like more than 200 villages in rural Alaska, they remain in their traditional location, selected for access to food resources such as moose, caribou, salmon, ducks, and seals. But cut off from the Alaskan road system, these villages have limited access to health care, jobs, and the various educational and entertainment opportunities that urban youth enjoy. Also, like many Alaskan villages, they have no running water. To survive, villagers collect rainwater in the summer and melt ice in the winter, keeping water for the family in a large plastic trash can from which everyone dips. Wastes are removed using a bucket and taken to dump sites outside the village. In Tuluksak, not even the health clinic has running water or flush toilets. Diseases such as hepatitis B, which is mostly obsolete in the rest of the country, are common in rural Alaska because of the difficulty in maintaining good sanitary conditions.

There is little family and community pressure to attend school in Tuluksak, where the child poverty rate looms over 61 percent, so many children do not receive an education. They spend their day "huffing" gasoline, a favorite pastime of getting "high" from chemical fumes for many villagers for three generations. In Hooper Bay, where the child poverty rate is over 51 percent, a series of "copycat suicides" during the mid-1990s claimed 10 percent of the high school population, affecting every family. Neither village has organized programs or activities for young people, and the nearest youth center is more than 25 miles away.

Rural Youth Substance Abuse

A recent study by the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse (CASA) found that smoking, drinking, and drug use among young teens is significantly higher in rural than in urban America. The study reported:

- Rural 8th-graders were 104 percent more likely to use amphetamines, including methamphetamine ("meth"), 50 percent more likely to use cocaine, and 34 percent likelier to smoke marijuana than urban 8th-graders.
- 10th- and 12th-graders in rural America are also more likely than their urban peers to use drugs and alcohol.
- The huge increase in the production, trafficking, and use of meth has taken a great toll on rural America.

Much like crack in the 1980s, meth has been responsible for a huge surge in violence, including child abuse. In 1998, law enforcement officials and the Drug Enforcement Administration seized over 5,750 meth labs across rural America, many of them in homes with children — a sixfold increase since 1994.[25]

"Yeah, we are up against a lot here. Drugs — kids around here use a lot of drugs — alcohol, weed, and even cocaine. And they drink a lot."

— Clifton Sutton, 17 years old, Duncan, Mississippi

Father and son,
Cowan, Kentucky

Photo by Bob Winsett

Transportation is limited and other physical infrastructures are weak.

Many rural families lack basic amenities that people in urban areas take for granted:

- Essential services — adequate plumbing and sewer connections, paved roads, safe drinking water, and public transportation — are much less available in many rural communities. Some don't even have electricity.
- In 1995, rental housing in rural America was only half as likely as an urban rental to have indoor plumbing and heating.[26]
- There were no telephones in 23 percent of the homes of poor rural children in 2000.[27]
- Technology is less available to rural children. They are less likely to have a home computer (42 vs. 53 percent in metro areas) or to have Internet access at home (32 vs. 44 percent).[28] Some 95 percent of rural and small towns do not have high-speed Internet connections, and there they would cost up to seven times more than they would in urban areas.[29] These statistics represent the total rural population; the situation is far worse in the remote pockets of poverty.

Transportation: A Major Challenge

The lack of transportation affects all other issues — and deepens their severity. Without the ability to travel, children miss out on experiences and opportunities that are important for their growth. Here are the facts:

- Nearly 40 percent of the nation's rural population has no public transit, and nearly 57 percent of poor rural adults do not own a car.[30]
- Late and weekend work hours present another obstacle, and low-income workers with these shifts often have no choice about their schedule. Since it is often expensive to run public transit after 7:00 p.m., many of the providers that do exist have cut back service in the evening.
- Nearly 31 percent of the families surveyed by the Children's Health Fund in 2001 lived more than 10 miles from their doctor, neighborhood health clinic, or hospital, and more than 7 percent lived between 25 and 50 miles from the nearest health facility.[31]
- The same survey found that approximately 20 percent of poor children lack access to health care because they have no transportation to the doctor's office, and 75 percent of them live in rural areas with no public transportation.[32]
- Rural children often cannot participate in after-school enrichment programs, social activities, and sports because their transportation options are limited.
- Transportation is critical to getting people off public assistance and is one of the issues most frequently mentioned by service agencies when considering welfare-to-work programs.[33]
- Lack of transportation was the second most common reason cited by rural adults for not getting a job.[34] Rural employers cite poor transportation as a common cause of tardiness, absenteeism, and ultimately resignations and termination.[35]

"When you try to figure out how to solve the problems of the poor, there are so many interrelated issues. People ask, 'Why don't they just go to schools so that they can get a job.' Well, tell this to the single mom without a car. She needs to figure out how to get her kids to day care, then go to school then back to day care, and then home. It's a very complicated, tough issue that we've been struggling with for a while. Although we are not giving up, we know that maybe there is just no great single solution."

— Gerry Roll, Executive Director, Hazard Perry County Community Ministries, Kentucky

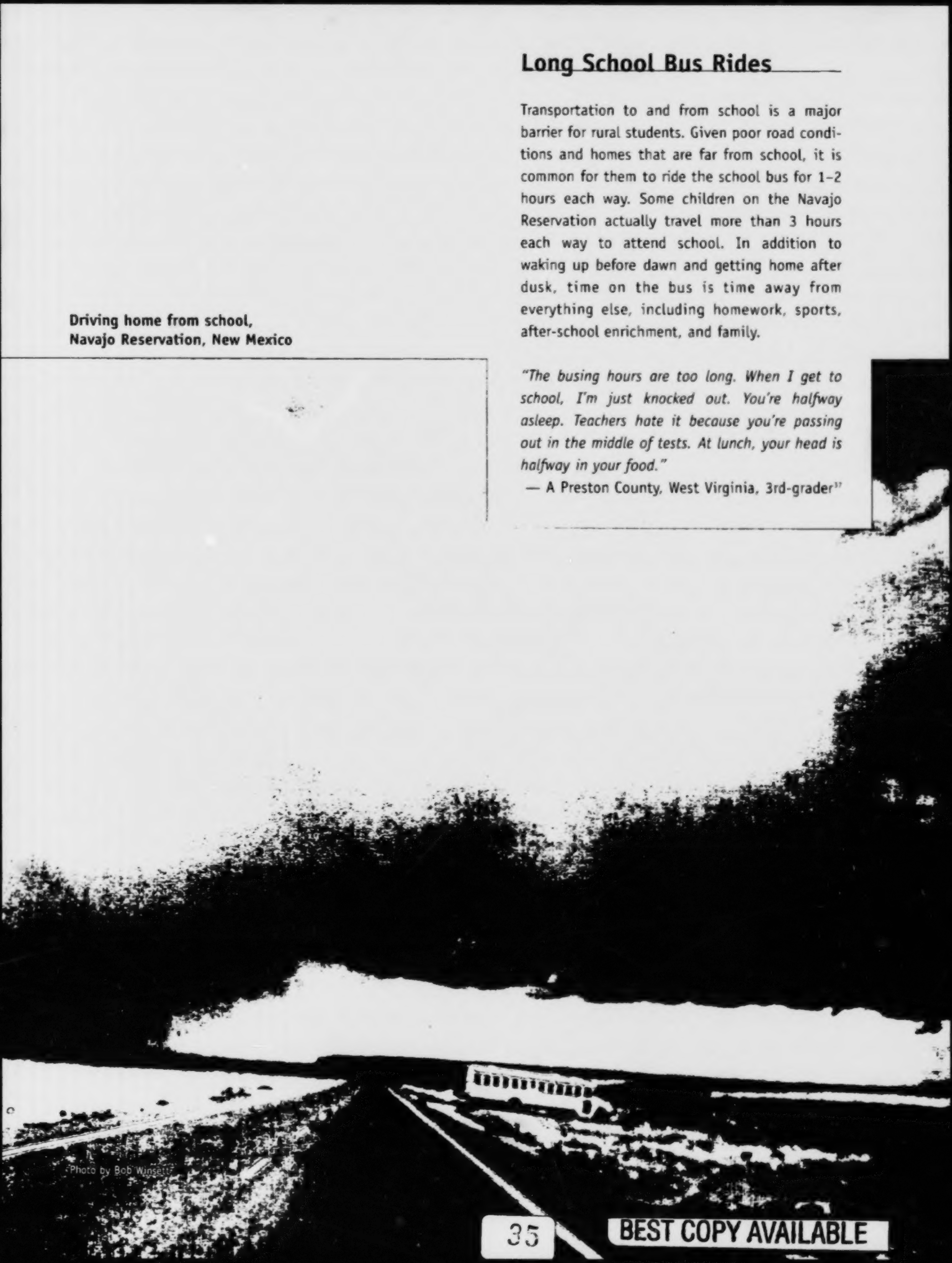
Did you know . . .

Of the 547 federally recognized American Indian tribes in the United States, only 19 currently have federally funded public transportation.[36]

Long School Bus Rides

Transportation to and from school is a major barrier for rural students. Given poor road conditions and homes that are far from school, it is common for them to ride the school bus for 1–2 hours each way. Some children on the Navajo Reservation actually travel more than 3 hours each way to attend school. In addition to waking up before dawn and getting home after dusk, time on the bus is time away from everything else, including homework, sports, after-school enrichment, and family.

> *"The busing hours are too long. When I get to school, I'm just knocked out. You're halfway asleep. Teachers hate it because you're passing out in the middle of tests. At lunch, your head is halfway in your food."*
>
> — A Preston County, West Virginia, 3rd-grader[11]



Driving home from school, Navajo Reservation, New Mexico

Photo by Bob Winsett

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Town Hall, Mississippi

Photo by Bill Munro

Family self-sufficiency is hard to attain.

How much does it take for children and their families to survive and thrive? One measure, the Self-Sufficiency Standard, developed by Wider Opportunities for Women, estimates that a single parent family with three children would need to earn $28,860 per year – to provide for basic housing, child care, food, transportation, and medical needs. When family income falls short, children's basic needs are often neglected.

- Jobs in rural areas typically pay less than urban jobs and are less likely to offer benefits.[38] In 2000, the median household income was $32,837 in nonmetro areas compared to $44,984 in metro areas.[39] Although it costs about 16 percent less on average to live in rural areas, this difference does not close the earnings gap.[40]
- Rural America has a shortage of jobs. Between 1992 and 1997, the employment rate among the poor increased by 8 percent in urban, 4 percent in suburban, and remained flat in rural America.[41]
- Rural economies are rarely diverse; one large employer tends to dominate a region. The closing of a textile plant or coal mine can thus send a local economy into a tailspin.
- Poor rural families who are eligible for public assistance are less likely to receive it than are poor families in urban areas. There has been a sharp and steady decline in both urban and rural families who receive public assistance, almost a 50 percent drop since 1988.[42] The stigma attached to welfare makes many rural families reluctant to seek public assistance, and their isolation accounts for a lack of information about the available government programs and services. Furthermore, many of these families distrust the government and other institutions designed to support them and are less likely to turn to them for help.

As seen in Janice Franklin's interview on the next page, rural parents who work are often exposed to stresses: fewer child care options, poor wages, lack of job security and job training, and limited transportation. They often have limited opportunities to improve their skills and develop the types of careers that might lift them out of poverty. As a result, even families with a working parent struggle with poverty.

Photo by Kate Lapides

A street in the Central California Valley

A Month in the Life of Janice Franklin

Meet Janice Franklin, age 45, of Cowan, Kentucky, who lives with her husband, Benny, and her 16-year-old daughter, Janet. Janice provides full-time child care without compensation for her neighbor's 3-year-old son, so his mother can care for her two other children, who are disabled. Janice holds two associate degrees from the local community college but hasn't been able to find a job that pays enough to offset job-related expenses. Her last job as a child care worker paid a net salary of $100 a month. Benny works the night shift in the town's sanitation department. Janice's story illustrates the plight of many rural working families: they are not eligible for welfare yet struggle each month to survive.

I grew up around here, but I've lived in many different places. It's hard to find work in this area, so I've moved . . . all over the place, but I always come back here because this is home. Here, I own land and can put out my garden in the spring and summer and grow fresh vegetables. And when times get hard, it's really good to have your family around. When you live away, it feels very lonely. Although it's tough around here, I wouldn't want to live anywhere else.

But it's always very tough to make ends meet — very tough. Benny works for the Sanitation Department and earns $6.10 an hour. He's had several other jobs, but this one pays the most. His last job in construction paid more money per hour, but because of the weather, he only worked three-to-four days each week. So he actually made less money.

I just dread when the bills come each month. You see, I suffer from bad nerves, and when the bills come I get all stressed out, wondering how we are going to pay. We are always so behind. We have to decide every month how much we will pay for each bill so that we don't get so far behind. We often choose between paying part of the electric bill and buying extra groceries. We do get food stamps, but the amount we get is really not enough to feed everyone. I figure that we need about $100 more each month to have enough to eat. I get so overwhelmed each time we have to shuffle all the expenses around and we are always making these hard choices. We can barely pay our monthly bills and then we get the home and car insurance bills. That's when it really hurts. I try real hard not to panic, but I can't help it. The harder we try, it just seems to keep getting worse. Then it gets to a point where I can't take the stress anymore. I just sit down and cry. It upsets my system real bad — it gets right to my nerves. You can't imagine how tough it is . . . very, very tough.

Janice Franklin and daughter Janet in Cowan, Kentucky

Photo by Bob Winsett

Franklin Family of Four: Income and Expenses

Monthly Income

Gross	$1,102.00
Net	$874.00
Food Stamps	$134.00

Health insurance coverage at work covers 80 percent of costs.
Janet is enrolled in the Kentucky Health Insurance Program for Children (KCHIP).

Monthly Expenses

Prescriptions	$25 (not covered by insurance)
Mobile home payment:	$173.46
Mobile home insurance:	$25 ($300/year)
Property tax	$8.92 ($107/year)
Car payment	$275.46
Car insurance	$50 ($300 every six months)
Car taxes, tags	$2.50 ($30/year)
Gas and upkeep	approx. $130 (Note: This car was recently repossessed because the family could not meet the monthly payments.)
Other insurance	$30
Food beyond food stamps	$180
Garbage bill	$10
Water	$16 (Well water is unsafe to drink; family must buy bottled water)
Phone	$50
Electricity	$135 (average)
TOTAL:	$1,111.34

Unmet Needs:

Braces for Janet	$1,500 (not covered by insurance)
Eyeglasses for Janice	$200 (trying to save enough to buy them)

The family rarely buys new clothes, shoes, or gifts and has little money for recreational activities and books. Last year they received a $2,500 earned income tax credit, which was used for clothing ($400), while the remainder was spent on overdue insurance bills, taxes and late fees, short out of town trips to visit family, occasional video rentals, school supplies, a used prom dress for Janet, and Christmas gifts (bought on credit).

Why Have Rural Children Been Left Behind?

The previous section described the challenges that poor rural children face. This section analyzes the reasons why they have been left behind.

- The human capital in rural communities is underdeveloped, limiting change from the "bottom up."
- Rural families do not have enough strong community institutions that serve children and youth.
- Rural communities have a weak economic base.
- "Top down" assistance has missed the mark in poor rural communities.

A large body of research has identified what children need to overcome the challenges of poverty. One of the most recent analyses of research on youth development was conducted by the National Academy of Sciences. Its report, ***Community Programs to Promote Youth Development***, identifies personal and social assets that increase the healthy development and well being of adolescents that help to establish their successful transition from childhood to adulthood, regardless of where they live. This scientific review suggests that the more assets children possess, the greater the likelihood that they will grow into successful, healthy adults. These assets come from a combination of their personal characteristics and the support of their community.

Rural children living in poverty have a tougher time attaining these assets. They have less access to community institutions that can help them thrive, and poor rural communities have greater difficulty obtaining the support necessary to develop these assets. In a country with great national wealth, considerable philanthropy, innovative nonprofits, and profitable businesses that collectively fund many programs to help people, why isn't the money reaching the rural children most in need so that they will no longer be left behind? There are both "bottom up" and "top down" reasons – problems within the communities and problems with the way money flows to them.

The human capital in rural communities is underdeveloped, limiting change from the "bottom up."

Families in suburbs, small towns, and the wealthier parts of cities can usually depend on myriad individuals (human capital) to help meet their needs. Most can count on politically skilled and well-connected leaders who can attract and generate resources and build partnerships to put the resources to good use. They can count on skilled professionals to teach the children and keep whole families healthy, as well as entrepreneurs who create jobs and goods and services in response to the demands of the marketplace. And they can count on an educated workforce, able to meet the needs of current and new local employers.

Isolated rural communities suffer from deficits in all of these areas of human capital. And the results are devastating.

Rural families do not have enough strong community institutions to serve children and youth.

Leaders in isolated rural communities with no connections to philanthropic and government funding are at a definite disadvantage in raising the resources they need to be effective. As a result, communities face obstacles building their economies or creating the institutions needed to educate their people and provide good physical and mental health care. Furthermore, they face difficulties providing young people with opportunities that influence their positive growth and development. Young people who manage to succeed despite the odds usually leave the community, creating a "brain drain" that deprives the area of future leaders, entrepreneurs, and professionals. Those who stay face a future without opportunity.

Rural communities have a weak economic base.

These communities are trapped in a modern "catch-22." Families are poor because few jobs pay decent salaries or offer benefits. Businesses with good jobs choose not to locate in these areas, because the communities have weak human capital. Without a strong economy, rural areas have a weak tax base and few philanthropic resources and therefore cannot offer the many educational, health, and social services they need to build their human capital.

A scene from the Central California Valley

Photo by Kate Lapides

"Top down" assistance has missed the mark in poor rural communities.

Even though government and philanthropic assistance does help rural families, most programs have not been designed to build human capital. While direct help to millions of families through tax credits and public assistance programs is critically important, by directing assistance to individuals rather than institutions, these funds have not, for the most part, helped to create the systems that will build the skills of residents to enable them to become self-sufficient.

Resources directed at physical infrastructure (highways, etc.) are not focused on building human resources. For example, since 1965, 63 percent of the Appalachian Regional Commission (the federal agency set up to support Appalachian counties) grants have helped build highways and access roads. Only 10 percent of the grants have funded education and job training programs, and a mere 0.1 percent has been spent on local leadership and civic development.[43]

Programs for children and families are usually under funded and focused on single issues (nutrition, remedial education, or access to technology). They do not build community support systems for children, such as youth organizations, libraries, or community centers, which could use these funds.

In addition, federal government programs for children and families are not adequately reaching remote communities because of how they have been designed. For example, some programs:

- Have an implicit or explicit priority that favors urban areas, such as a preference for areas with large numbers of low-income residents. For example, when Congress called for a cap on the cost of enrolling an AmeriCorps member, rural programs that had only a few members were put at a disadvantage because they could not spread their operating costs across a large group.
- Are inflexible regarding age, income, or range of services to be provided. For example, prohibiting the use of funds for transportation makes it difficult for rural communities to reach the neediest families.
- Mandate that funds go to a specific type of organization, such as a school. This was the case with the 21st Century Learning Centers funding, which was limited to schools until 2001, when Congress opened the program to enable community organizations to apply directly.
- Distribute funds based on the results of a competitive process that favors applicants who are skilled at writing grants. Without targeting, these dollars are unlikely to reach the neediest rural areas that cannot hire sophisticated grant writers or even research the grants for which they might be eligible.
- Rely on vouchers as the only form of assistance. Where no providers exist or where they offer poor services, families are left without options.
- Administer services without adequately considering a community's cultural and geographic context. For example, when the US Department of Housing and Urban Development built houses on the Navajo Reservation, it did not give sufficient emphasis to the American Indian culture, which respects the land and prefers greater distances between houses. As a result, units have remained vacant despite the people's need.

Photo by Susan Warner

A young boy from White Oak, Tennessee

A scene from the Central California Valley

Photo by Kate Lapides

- Require a mandatory match that the poorest communities cannot meet because of a lack of philanthropic and corporate resources and a shortage of skilled people to identify these resources and write grant applications.

Private sector resources are an important complement to public funding in rural areas. But here, too, rural areas are at a disadvantage. For example, the Central Valley of California is a rural area with high levels of child poverty, particularly in many small isolated towns. The Great Valley Center of California, a nonprofit corporation that supports the well being of the Central California Valley, conducted a study of philanthropic activity in the state of California. They found that for all grants related to youth or otherwise, the Central Valley received only 40 percent per person of the statewide average.[44]

Similarly, the South has 34 percent of the nation's poverty, but receives less than 14 percent of its foundation assets. Its 345 historically poor counties have 11 percent of the region's population but just 1 percent of its philanthropic assets. Three-quarters of these counties have no foundation assets at all.[45] To address this imbalance, the Southern Regional Development Initiative is working to increase the flow of philanthropic development capital to the South's poorest rural communities. Other efforts include:

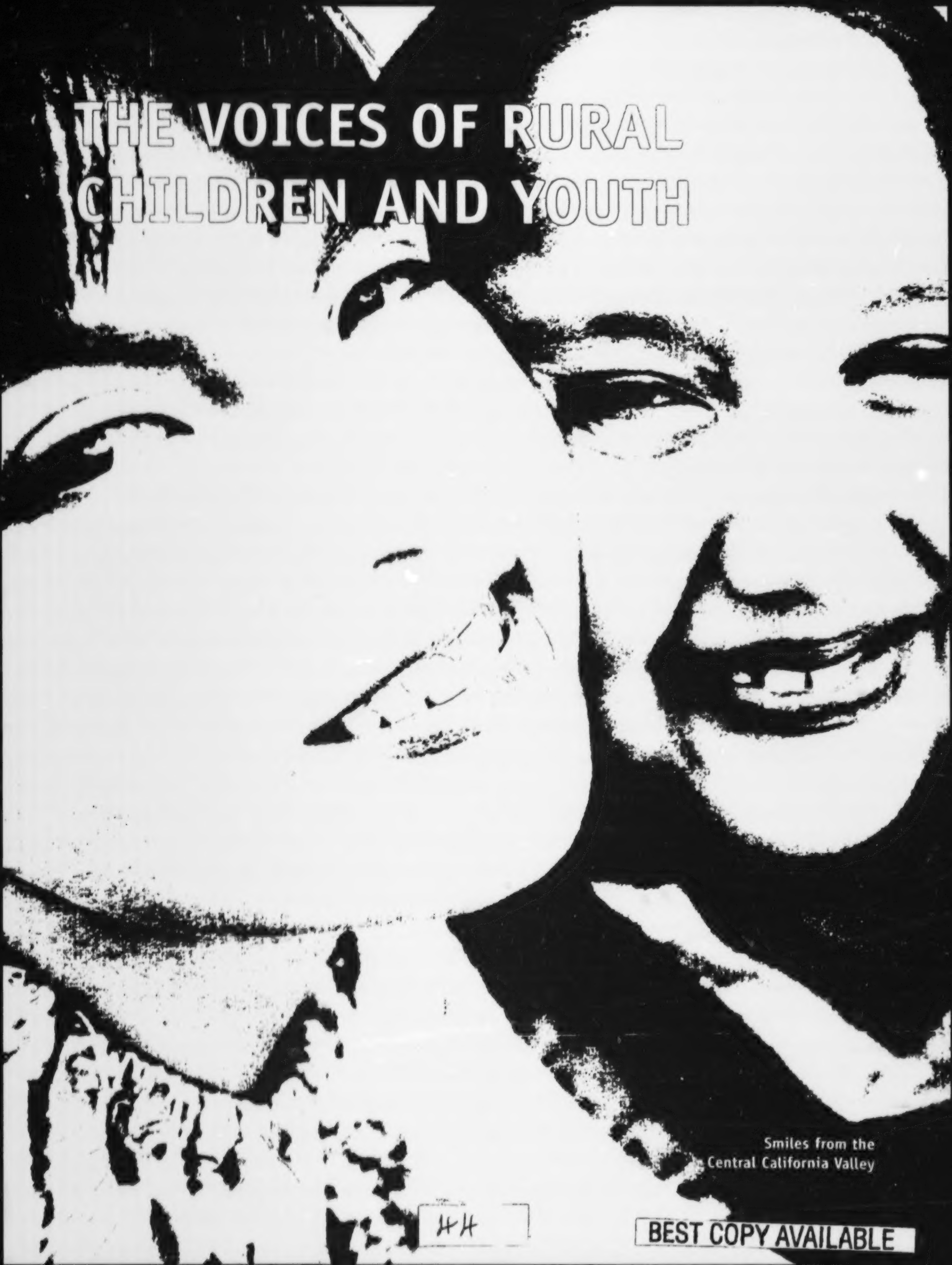
- The National Rural Funders Collaborative, founded in 2001 to increase the investment capital available to rural areas by $100 million over 10 years; and
- The Rural Funders Working Group, which is supported by the Neighborhood Funders Group to increase awareness of funding needs in rural communities and to encourage partnerships to respond to rural needs.

This is a good start to attracting funds to poor rural areas, but more needs to be done to correct the imbalance, including:

- New and expanded public-private partnerships and community collaborations, that can leverage and combine resources for a greater impact;
- Changing the way government and philanthropic funding is distributed to enable isolated rural communities to compete effectively for resources; and
- Increasing public and private investments to build community support systems in historically poor rural areas.

While strategic partnerships and changes to existing programs can accomplish much of this work, it will require a targeted investment of new public and private dollars to implement the strategies outlined in Part Three.

THE VOICES OF RURAL CHILDREN AND YOUTH



Smiles from the
Central California Valley

44

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The voices of children and young people put a face on statistics in this report. Most of these children have grown up in environments that are extremely challenging — because of family problems, isolation, or poverty. Yet, their stories illustrate what is needed to overcome poverty. They show the importance of caring adults in their lives, whether parents, relatives, teachers, coaches, or mentors. They stress the need for constructive activities and talk about what happens without them. Some of these voices describe the power of "giving back" as a way of enhancing their own lives. Finally, they provide hope. Among them are outstanding young leaders who could well make a real difference in the lives of the next generation if they stay in their communities. As Craven Cook of Marks, Mississippi, so aptly said, ***"We need to start with the young people to rebuild the community. If they grow up just seeing all the things that are wrong, they're going to fall into the same traps. You've got to start by teaching the children the right way and show them that they have hope and opportunity — you know?"***

These voices also tell us about problems that are not captured in the statistics: the effects of racism and classism on education and opportunities, the impact of school consolidation on small communities, the consequences of parental substance abuse across generations, the problem of teen pregnancy, and the lack of constructive activities outside school. Now we hear from these young people and learn about their lives and the pockets of poverty where they live.

Tommiea Jackson:

The "Brain Drain" Dilemma

At 23, Tommiea Jackson is a rare example of an educated young person who chose to move back to her community. With the problem of rural "brain drain" robbing many communities of effective leaders, her dilemma has an impact on the future of these communities. Tommiea lives with her parents, sister, and brother in her childhood home in Marks, Mississippi. Since returning with a master's degree in journalism from the University of Mississippi, she has been a youth coordinator for the Quitman County Development Organization, her position paid for by VISTA/AmeriCorps. Tommiea received full scholarships for both college and graduate school and decided to return to give back to her community. In a teary, emotional interview, she tells about her community, her family, and her decision to return.

I came back to Marks because I needed a job and I wanted to do something at home. I don't know if I'll be here forever, but I need to do something for my people — for the kids. Yet I'm here, and it feels like I'm nowhere. My uncle is a leader in this community, and he does a lot. After being around him, you think you want to do something too. But this is hard, because all the people who go to college around here, they leave immediately, and no one actually comes back. So everyone's gone. I mean, I can't count any of my classmates who went to college who are here.

But I want to be here — God knows. But there are so many other things I want to do with my life. I'd love to get a job working for a magazine. I'd love to go to New York. My uncle always tells me that it's hard to get people to forego the riches of the world. Yet the thing that is keeping me here is the kids. Gosh, they'll live in my office if I let them. They need so much. We do have a program here, but there are only so many kids that we can handle. And there's really no other place for them to go. They relate to me because I'm young and they think I'm different. I listen to the same music that they do and I guess I'm a good role model. It's just so painful because I talk to my friends from college and grad school, and they all seem to be doing bigger things, making so much more money. When I tell them that I'm living at home with my parents, it seems like they are doing so much better than me. I do think what I'm doing is important — gosh, there's no one else doing what I'm doing for these kids. I love these kids, yet when I recently told my sorority sister what I'm doing, she asked why.

I just think that these kids listen to me and hear what I say. I recently had a conversation with a 12-year-old girl who told me that her best friend is pregnant. We talked, and I told her about my life and that if I had a child I couldn't have done any of the things that I've done. I think she heard me. Some of the girls tell me that they want to be just like me. This is why it's so hard to leave. I often just sit and cry.

So many little girls around here get pregnant. I'm convinced it's because they have nothing else to do. I just think that if they had something else to do and someone else to tell them that it hurts you to get pregnant, then maybe it would be different. The kids around here really need a recreation center. They need to see that there is more out there than just Marks or Batesville. They need to get out and see. Then they might become interested in different things. Now, they see the new casino that is only one hour away. They see that they can get a job and earn money. They think that if they can make good money at the casino, they don't need to finish school. And lots of them drop out.

Did you know . . .

A region's unemployment rate is a good predictor of whether young people choose to stay or leave rural areas. An increase in employment increases the likelihood that young people will stay. [46]

Tommiea Jackson

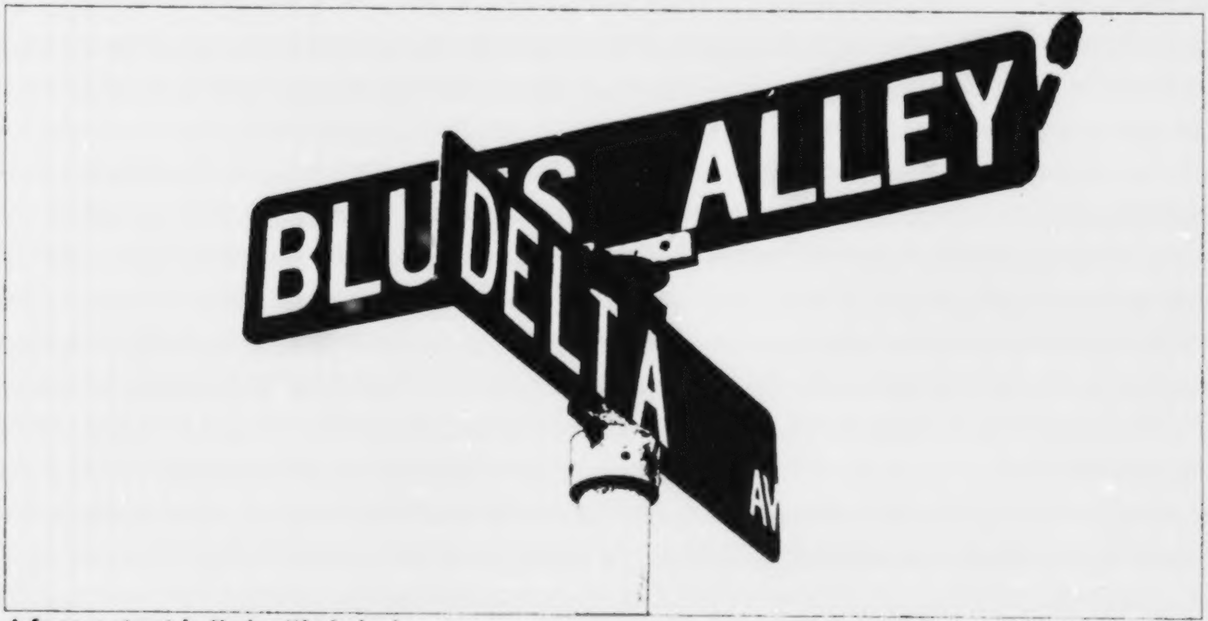
Photo by Kate Lapides

It can be pretty tough around here. You see that train track over there? It literally divides the community. Almost 98-99 percent of the kids in this school system are black. In the private school on the other side of town, the kids are all white. When I see a white child going to the public school, I feel so sad, because you know that his or her family is *really* poor. They're really poor. White and black kids have *nooooo* interaction with each other. Our kids see the white kids from the private school going to Europe for their senior class trip. Our kids go twenty minutes away to Clarksdale — ya know, it's just really sad.

I think the thing that helped me was my family. I'm the only one of all my friends growing up who had both parents living at home. Although we didn't have a lot of money, we took vacations every year. We drove to a lot of places. I always knew that there was a big world outside of Marks, Mississippi. So, for me, college was always the next step. I never thought otherwise.

Focus on the

Mississippi River Delta



A famous street in Marks, Mississippi

Photo by Bill Munro

Only a few hours outside Memphis, the Mississippi River Delta is a completely different world. As the home of the "blues," the Delta region has left an important cultural imprint on music, both in the United States and abroad. And it has some of the most fertile soil in the country, producing cotton, corn, soybeans, and rice. Yet mechanization, pesticides, lumbering, and manufacturing have led to erosion and water pollution. Although nowhere in sight, the Mississippi River is the defining feature of life in the Delta.

The people and events that have brought the Delta national attention — slavery, the Underground Railroad, the Civil War, segregation, the Ku Klux Klan, the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, Jim Crow laws, the sharecroppers, and wealthy farmers and the poor living in a land of prosperity — continue to affect the Delta and its people. The persistent poverty and racism that have plagued the Delta for generations continue today. As Tommiea Jackson (see page 46) told us, this entrenched poverty drives out homegrown talent and makes it difficult to cultivate effective local leaders.

The problem of racism was discussed by several people we interviewed from the Delta. A 19-year-old single mother from a small community in Arkansas gives her account: ***"This is a racist town. This is not a black people's town — it's a white people's town. I'm just telling you how it is, how it's been for a very long time. The race stuff here is real bad. It affects us bad. It's not just the people; it's even the police officers. The white officers, I mean they drive around constantly, all morning, all day, and all night and they just H-A-R-A-S-S. Harass. I even saw an officer harass my cousin with my own two eyes when he did absolutely nothing. If black kids go somewhere and they just want to hang out, the officers always break it up and take 'em into jail. But white kids — they can go anywhere, day or night, to drink and smoke, with their cars parked right there all night long. And they never, ever stop them. Never, ever. And they hang out seven days a week. And you know what? No white kids ever get into trouble with the officers."***

SNAPSHOT: Quitman County, Mississippi

These figures provide a picture of a typical county in the Mississippi River Delta.

2000 population	**10,177: 68.6% black, 30.3% white**
Children 0 -17 living in poverty (1999)	**43.2%**
Free and reduced lunches (2001)	**approximately 80%**
High school graduates (over 25 years old)	**approximately 27%**
College graduates (over 25 years old)	**approximately 5%**
Median household income (1997)	**$18,118**
% enrolled in Medicaid (2000)	**21%**
% births to single mothers (1999)	**75%**
Annual unemployment rate (1999)	**9%**

Source: US Census Bureau, State and County Quickfacts, 2000.

Race: The Problem Persists

In Quitman County, only one of five students who started public high school graduated with their class in 2001. Racial segregation in the schools is a telling feature and has a negative effect on the children. In 2001, 97 percent of the children in the high school were black; 3 percent were white: According to Craven Cook, *"I guess you could say our community is divided — you know — blacks and whites. It brings the whole community down when everyone does what they want to do and they don't work together. Like in sports, the white kids go to the playoffs every year and it's a really big deal — the whole community gets behind them. They have fancy uniforms and good equipment and stuff. When we go to the playoffs, we don't have that much. We try to work with what we have; the church and school help out a little. But the community doesn't get behind us. You never see our scores in the newspaper. It makes you feel real bad after awhile."*

Isaac Fields:

Promise Uncovered

Isaac Fields, 19 years old, comes from a tight-knit family of six children, most of whom left the mountains after college. His story illustrates the classism faced by many poor rural youth who travel long distances to attend school with wealthier "city" kids. Snubbed by educators as "a poor kid" who didn't hold much promise, Isaac is an example of how strong family support and opportunities to develop leadership skills have made him a leader in his community. On any given day, he can be found in the PowerUP! Lab at the Cowan Community Center in Letcher County, Kentucky, working as an AmeriCorps/VISTA volunteer. (See pages 82 and 83 for more information about these programs.) The center is the only place in the community that offers myriad services to children and adults, including tutoring, after-school programs, and computer training.

I live in a hollow near Cowan. It's our own community. In the mountains, the streams carve out a natural roadway, and the roads get hollowed by the water. The hollow that I live in is Bo Fork, and it has about 20 houses and stretches for several miles. It's graveled with no street signs. Now I consider the town of Cowan to be my community, but when I was younger, the hollow was my community.

Save the Children

Issaac Fields Photo by Bob Winsett

When I was about 11 years old, I started getting involved in the youth group here at the Cowan Community Center. All my brothers and sisters were involved also, and this has had a big impact on my entire family. Many poor kids growing up in this area are very shy and reserved, and this is how I used to be. I could barely talk to people and look them in the eye. I had no self-confidence. Everyone here is brought up to feel self-conscious about being from eastern Kentucky. I knew all about the stereotypes that people had about me and my people. I've learned that it's not bad to be a hillbilly, and I am proud of my background. My experience with the youth group helped to push me into situations where I learned that I had ideas and opinions and that it was okay to express them. I discovered that I had a powerful voice, and I developed a self-confidence that many others around here don't have.

After a few years, I became a leader in the youth group and eventually its president. As president, I learned how to facilitate meetings and help to develop our team. We did several

“There is a definite prejudice against the poor kids. They feel lonely at school, are chastised by the other kids, and are treated differently by the teachers. The school system around here puts everyone in their place. The poor kids can never be the cheerleaders. They know this, and it really affects their self-confidence. They grow up without any hope. Hopelessness is a lack of power. This lack of power is like a self-fulfilling prophecy. Kids get beaten down, and after awhile they just give up trying.”

— Tracy Frazier
Letcher County Community Action Team

community service projects, such as cleaning up the rivers throughout our community. Save the Children provided us with the funding to go to a statewide leadership training conference. It was here that I met other kids from eastern Kentucky who went through these types of programs. Through this training, we became more aware of our community issues and more empowered to try new things to improve our communities. We learned that regardless of what we learn, we are the only ones who can truly help ourselves. We can get the best training in the world, but it doesn't matter unless we use it in the right way. I think that many of us who attended became more self-confident and ultimately better people.

Another program that was very valuable to me was Upward Bound. We took trips to D.C., New York City, and Chicago. This travel experience was so important in giving me a broader understanding that although all *places* are different, the *people* are basically the same everywhere. We all have the same problems. I realized that although people might believe the stereotype about me, I was not so different.

I think that a lot of kids growing up in this region are not as lucky as I have been. Lots of kids drop out of high school, and lots use drugs. But I think the biggest issue facing our youth is a lack of things to do. There is really nothing *to* do. This center is the only place around where kids can come after school, use the computers, play basketball, get homework support, and just hang out without getting into trouble. I'm convinced that without positive activities, kids get into trouble. They go on top of the strip mines and have parties and get drunk.

Poor kids in our area can't get an adequate education — it's very biased. There are basically the kids who "have" and the kids who don't. I'm convinced that this affects a teacher's judgment of a child. There is big discrimination. I've seen how the rich kids get more attention and more help in school. The kids who really need help often do not get it. They just fall through the cracks and end up dropping out of school. I was considered one of these poor kids, and I saw the way that the teachers treated me. I did the same work and got the same grades as the rich kids — but I was treated completely different. I was often ignored and nobody helped me. Even after I had failed a few classes, nobody even noticed . . . I remember my mom telling me about an incident with my sister. She had made all A's on her report card and one time came home with a D. When my mom called the guidance counselor, she was told, "She's not going to college anyway, so don't worry about it." My mom did worry about it, and my sister did go to college.

I know that the government has spent a lot of money for nicer schools. I believe that they are more concerned with the way the schools look than in the education they provide. Although I don't think that I got a good education, college has always been part of my plan. That's why I have this VISTA position, so that I can save money for college.

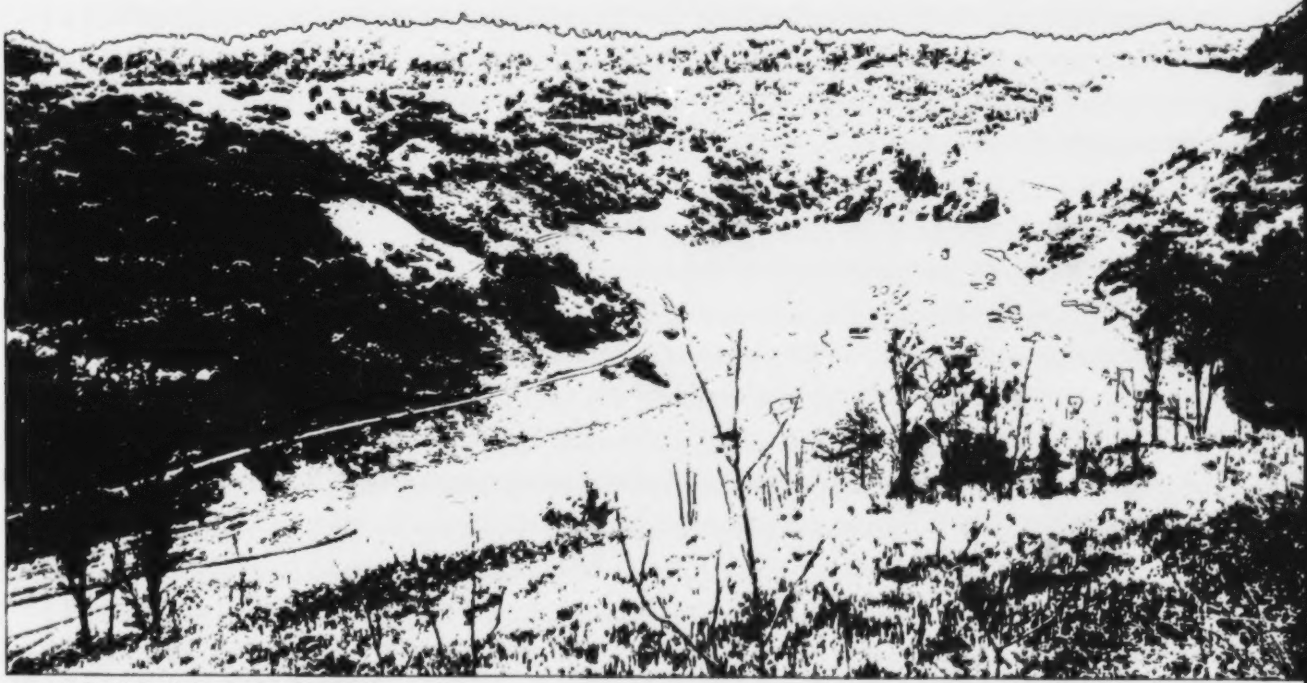
Did you know . . .

"Abuse of prescription drugs is a real epidemic plaguing the region and is responsible for 60 drug-related deaths in Letcher Country over the past year."

— Tracy Frazier
Letcher County Community Action Team

Focus on

Appalachia



A coal field in Kelly Fork, Kentucky

Photo by Bob Winsett

The plight of central Appalachia is deeply rooted in its history. Dating from the early 20th century, this region began to prosper as companies in other states recognized its abundance of coal, a valuable natural resource imbedded deep in these mountains. As coal companies moved into the region, other industries followed. Railroads and steel and power plants were built. The coal companies bought the rights to mine the land, often from unsophisticated residents who signed away their property for as little as 50 cents an acre. Gradually, as the coal companies gained more power and employed many people, the residents were forced into a two-tiered class structure that exploited their lack of education and skills and eventually rendered them powerless. In an effort to control their employees, companies moved the miners into company-run coal camps, which provided housing, schools, and health care. The workers were required to use these services and to shop at the overpriced company stores. Much like an ancient fiefdom, this structure created a society of "haves" and "have-nots," which continues to dominate the region. Many believe that this dependency on the coal companies kept the workers' families from becoming self-sufficient and solving the problems of their communities. After many companies left in the 1950s, taking with them a massive transfer of wealth, mechanization replaced many of the coal jobs; those who remained were largely uneducated, unemployed, and disabled (often from black lung disease), and were relegated to a life of poverty.

The absence of a public sector and a shortage of local leadership have left fragile support systems in the region. When millions of federal dollars were poured into the area in the 1960s, the structure for using this money constructively was virtually nonexistent. Although the situation is somewhat better today, *similar problems continue* to hamper development.

After years of powerlessness resulting from corporate paternalism, there remains a distrust of the institutions that might permit positive change. Decades of corporate exploitation have weakened the civic structures that make up a viable community. Much work is needed to dissolve the longstanding tensions between economic gain and the environmental problems caused by the exploitation of natural resources. And additional work is needed to give the community the self-confidence to generate civic participation and responsible government. Community leaders, such as Tracy Frazier from the Letcher County Community Action Team, believe that "we need to empower the people. In most places, when something is wrong, people try to fix it. Here, *people feel that they can't.* Nobody trusts that change is possible. I believe that change must come from within. We have lots of work to do to involve all sectors of our community to join together to create change."

Another problem is the way the people are viewed by the institutions, both public and private, that provide funds. ***"We are very white,"*** says a community leader, ***"but when you look at resources for poor people, they mostly target minorities. Appalachian white people need to be viewed as a minority population, because we miss out on so much of the funding. Our people have all the same risk factors as poor minorities: low education, poor schools, high rates of asthma, diabetes, and more general health problems. We are the same."***

SNAPSHOT: Letcher County, Kentucky

These figures provide a picture of a typical county in Appalachian Kentucky. The comparatively high median household income — resulting from the averaging of the incomes of more affluent residents with those of the poor families — clearly shows how poverty can get hidden when wealthy people are part of the population.

Letcher County was ranked number 102 of 120 counties in the state on child well being.[47]

2000 population	**25,277 (98% white)**
Children 0-17 living in poverty (1999)	**36.2%**
Children 0-5 living in poverty (1997)	**41% (vs. 27% for state)**
Free and reduced lunches (2001)	**approximately 66%**
High school graduates (over 25 years old)	**approximately 30%**
College graduates (over 25 years old)	**approximately 4%**
Median household income (1997)	**$22,893**
Source: US Census Bureau, State and County Quickfacts, 2000.	

- **One registered nurse and one licensed practical nurse serve 13 public schools.**
- **One mental health agency provides services to Letcher and seven other counties.**

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JoJo*:

Adult Mentors Help Beat the Odds

JoJo* is entering his senior year in a community in the Appalachian mountains of northern Tennessee. His story exemplifies the importance of caring adults in the life of a young person whose family cannot provide support. JoJo*'s chess coach and other adult advocates have faced a constant struggle to keep him in school and help him develop a skill that could lead to a college scholarship. His story is a remarkable testimony of a boy being pulled out of the dark shadow of poverty, with an opportunity for a bright future but always living just on the edge.

JoJo* would not talk about his family. When asked, he gracefully changed the subject. We learned, however, that he lives in a dilapidated house with no front door. It has no heat or running water, and his family finds it very difficult in the winter. His 42-year-old mother has suffered four strokes and spends much of her time in a wheelchair. His father, an alcoholic and substance abuser, is often drunk and physically abusive. Intense fighting and physical abuse are common in the family, and life at home is often so unbearable that JoJo finds other places to spend his days and nights. His chess coach and mentor has had to purchase shoes and clothing so that JoJo can participate in tournaments.

I knew nothing about chess until I was in the 7th grade. I came to this center one day and watched the older boys play. I thought it was really cool. I kept coming until I learned moves and started playing myself. In 8th grade I started playing in chess tournaments and started getting pretty good. Since then, I've been playing on our chess team. I get to travel to tournaments, and I was in Missouri a few weeks ago for the nationals. We got runner-up — second place out of seven teams from all over the country. This was good, but last year we actually won the whole thing — first place.

I'm not a master yet, but will be someday. To be a master, you need 2,300 points, and I'm only at 1,370. By next year I'll probably be at 1,700. Even though I'm not a master, I've beaten many great players and have met some of the world's masters. I like to pick people's minds. My goal is just to do my best and to help my team. The team always comes first. I love the feeling that you get after you win and you walk on the stage to get the trophy and then you get to carry it around. It's such a good feeling.

I guess our whole team is kind of famous around here because we've accomplished so much. We work really hard at it too. We're constantly doing stuff like publicity, thank you visits to banks and other contributors. Mr. Smith* makes sure that we get everything we need to be able to travel to tournaments. If it weren't for Mr. Smith, I would never have started playing chess. And I would definitely not be here right now. And if I wasn't playing chess, I would never have met the people I've met and seen the things I've seen.

***A chess player**

Photo by Bob Winsett

I like living here. Everybody knows everybody, and if someone new moves in, then everyone is real nice to them and makes them feel at home. There is no violence and drive-by stuff around here, like in bigger cities. But there are bad things around here too. People call this place GreenGrange. The stuff [marijuana] grows all over, even on the side of the road, and you can smell it. It's pretty bad. Lots of kids get messed up and then go to school. I've seen how the stuff can mess you up. My uncle drinks and smokes a lot. His wife left him, and he has no money. I've seen what drinking and drugs can do to you. I see how kids drop out of school because they are so messed up.

Chess has definitely kept me in school. If I ever dropped out, I couldn't be on the team. But if it wasn't for chess and for Mr. Smith, I probably would be a dropout already. There was a time when I pulled my back out from hanging sheetrock and I just didn't show up at school for awhile. The school was threatening to throw me out, but Mr. Smith and Ms. Beatrice* fought for me to stay. Mr. Smith said, "You don't want to be a redneck and just quit." He's not like a teacher, he's one of our best friends. We go over to his house and watch football games and stuff. Sometimes I even stay over there. He jokes around with us and helps us with our work. Not many people find a teacher like him — he's more like a friend.

I would like to go to college someday. Mr. Smith and Ms. Beatrice are helping to get me a scholarship. I'm pretty good in math and stuff, and I want to major in computer technology.

Vianna Gomez:

The Importance of Leadership Programs

Vianna Gomez, 16 years old, lives in Farmersville, a rural community in the heart of California's Central Valley. Her experience with the Future Farmers of America (FFA), a national leadership organization, has given her the opportunity to learn skills and understand the importance of an education. Until two years ago, she and her family lived in Linnel Camp, a migrant camp in Visalia for families who work in the fields. Vianna lives with both parents; her dad, a Mexican immigrant, is a migrant laborer, and her mother, a US citizen, works at the childcare center in the camp. Now an officer in FFA, Vianna describes her struggles in the past and discusses her excitement about her school activities and her hopes for the future.

I moved from the Linnel Camp in Visalia about two years ago. Linnel Camp is a community for farmworkers. It was, like, kind of difficult. We didn't have opportunities that other kids had. There's a little park inside the camp, and all the kids go and play baseball and soccer. We didn't have our own yards, so we shared yards. They had a study hall on Tuesdays and Wednesdays in Linnel Camp, but I don't know if they have it anymore. If you had problems with homework or something, they had it open, so I went there sometimes when I needed help. There's also a center inside Linnel, and sometimes they have different stuff going on for the kids so we didn't get bored. But sometimes they didn't open the center for months.

Here in Farmersville we have our own house. It's better. The community is different too. It's quiet, peaceful. Its better because I can do my homework and, you know, not hear the racket of all the kids in the camp.

Math is the hardest subject for me and for lot of other kids, too. Lots of students are really failing math, and we need people who will help tutor us, 'cause that subject is really hard. I think that our school should expand the library — you probably couldn't even fit nobody in there. They should have computers in there so kids can have their reports, 'cause teachers now don't allow handwritten reports, they're all typed. But we need computers to type with.

My grades are getting better now. I messed up my first two years. I regret it. I guess I was having some troubles, and it took too much of my time. But now I'm in FFA, and I'm an officer for the junior class. And my grades are better, actually.

FFA is actually a good program for the school because it changes your perspective and you learn about communication and public speaking and you learn how to work with one another. We do competitions and learn a lot of study skills, and we do lots of presentations and speeches in front of class, in front of other people, you know. We have, like, a computer contest to learn about computers, and we learn how farming is done and stuff like that. You also learn how to become a good leader, and there's a lot of stuff that you have to do that's good for your community. Usually we help pass out food during Thanksgiving, and we do canned food drives and we pass the stuff out at Christmas.

People around here need motivation. Because a lot of people that live here, their parents come from Mexico and they didn't get an education, so, you know, they don't push their kids to go to college, to get an education. And then, when kids' report cards come home they won't care, because they don't know what it means.

Vianna Gomez

Photo by Kate Lapides

A lot of people around here, they're alcoholics. The kids have lots of problems, they get beat up, and there is nowhere to go. A community center would be good for them to relieve their stress and get away for a little bit. Kids around here need someone to talk to, because instead of trying to solve their problems, they go and do something bad. We do have a school psychologist, and most students are scared of him, but I think he's really good. I can trust him. Like when I had a lot of problems, I would talk to people and they would say, "Hey, what's up with your arm?" After talking to Mr. Carrillo I started finding out that I wasn't the only one doing this. And he wanted to start a program, for kids who you know, hurt themselves and stuff like that.

Yeah, I don't know why I hurt myself — problems I guess. But then sometimes I did it just to do it. But now I don't do it anymore because I'm better.

I want to go to college and study psychology. I visited some campuses with FFA, and the one that I liked best was Santa Cruz. But I don't know. Maybe next year I might take my basics at the local community college and then, after I graduate, I can transfer over there. 'Cause, it's like hard and very expensive.

Did You Know . . .

Children of migrant workers may be vulnerable to harmful pesticides. Chemicals are often found on their parents' clothes and skin and in their homes, making their children vulnerable to high levels of these chemicals and therefore at high risk for related illnesses. Pesticide exposure can result in serious chronic health problems, including chronic fatigue, sleep disturbances, anxiety, memory problems, cancer, and birth defects. An estimated 313,000 farmworkers in the US may suffer from illness caused by pesticides, leading to approximately 800–1,000 deaths each year. [48]

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Focus on the

Central California Valley

CDK
JUSTICE
CDK

A boarded-up storefront in the Central California Valley

Photo by Kate Lapides

Agriculture, one of California's most important industries, has experienced significant growth in recent decades. Today, more than 50 percent of the major vegetable and 40 percent of the major fruit production in the country come from California. Predictably, perhaps, there is a huge disparity in the quality of life between those who own the land and those who work it.

The history of farmworkers in California's Central Valley dates from the 1760s, when the Spaniards brought laborers north from Mexico and Baja, California, to colonize and farm Northern California.[49] Immigrants, mainly from Mexico, have settled in California in large part because of the Bracero Program, an agreement between the two countries that allowed the United States to import low-paid Mexican laborers. This program was signed into law in 1951.

The farmworkers have faced many struggles, beginning with attempts to organize unions that started as early as 1910. Wealthy farmers and the government thwarted these efforts until the late 1950s-60s, when Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta laid the foundation for the farmworkers movement. Strikes, marches, and a grape boycott (which gained national attention) resulted in the United Farm Workers Organizing Committee (UFWOC) of the AFLCIO.

Despite the work of Chavez and Huerta, however, large inequities for immigrant farmworkers exist to this day. An estimated 700,000 agricultural workers work in California's fields and livestock facilities. Half are employed in the San Joaquin Valley of Central California.[50] These laborers are treated differently under US law: they are excluded from the protection designed to provide minimal standards of employment and collective bargaining rights for all other American workers. They are exempt from laws that require overtime payments, and most farms with fewer than 11 employees are exempt from protections under the Occupational Health and Safety Administration (OSHA). American children under the age of 14 may not work in any industry. Yet in agriculture the minimum age for employment is 12.

Some call the Central California Valley "the Other California," recognizing its vast differences from wealthier regions of the state. Its youth population is approximately 40 percent Latino and 43 percent white; projections suggest that by 2040 Latinos will be the overwhelming majority — 59 percent in the Central Valley.[51] With the base of political power being in Southern California and the Bay Area, the concerns of the valley have been overlooked. A recent study of philanthropic activity in the valley found that it is significantly underserved by institutions that could improve the region. Statewide, grants averaged $3 million per 100,000 people, but in the valley, grants averaged $1.2 million.[52] And the valley's poorest counties have a striking absence of organizations serving young people.

The valley contains 10 of the 12 counties with the highest unemployment rate in the state and many of its poorest counties. In 2000, every county in the San Joaquin Valley had a higher percentage of children who received free and reduced-price lunches than the state average — one indication that a large percentage of families are poor.

Did you know . . .

Agricultural workers are at significantly higher risk for chronic illness, such as heart disease, stroke, asthma, and diabetes. Unhealthy diets are seen as a major contributor to these conditions, as 81 percent of men and 76 percent of women have been found to have unhealthful body weights.[53]

SNAPSHOT: Planada, California

A good example of a pocket of poverty is Planada, California. In the heart of the San Joaquin Valley, the world's most productive agricultural area, Planada is one of the poorest communities; its residents have an annual per-capita income of just over $5,000. Seasonal workers live in more than two-thirds of the homes and are the poorest of the poor families there. Half of the town's population of 3,531 people is younger than 17, and half of these children live in poverty. Three-fourths speak Spanish at home, and 20 percent are not fluent in English.

Planada is an example of a community rich in culture but lacking many of the basic institutions found in more prosperous areas. The town is not incorporated, has no mayor or city hall, no hospital, no public library, no philanthropic foundation, and few businesses. Although there is an elementary school and will soon be a middle school, it has no high school, and young people have few recreational alternatives to sports.

In recent years, Planada's Community Development Corporation (CDC), one of a handful of local nonprofit organizations, helped to develop a strategic plan for the community with the hope of becoming an Enterprise Community (a government program that provides assistance to help poor communities develop economically). Although the application was unsuccessful, the CDC has continued its efforts "to map the assets" of Planada and engage the whole community in improving its physical, health, economic, and organizational capacity.

Nathaniel Pinto:

Community Service Provides a Purpose

Nathaniel Pinto lives in Huerfano, New Mexico, an isolated Navajo village miles from a post office, library, and stores, and two hours from his high school. He lives with his mother and two younger sisters. His birth father committed suicide when he was very young, and although his mother remarried, and Nathaniel refers to his stepfather as "Dad," he has never considered him a real father figure. His life has been shaped, in large part, by the caring leaders of his Chapter, the local governing unit on the Navajo reservation. As he enters his senior year, Nathaniel reflects on the people and opportunities that have enabled him to turn his life around.

There are a bunch of really good things about this place. It's quiet. *Sooooo* quiet. You can leave your dog outside and ride your bike. There aren't many murders around here. You feel very free out here on the reservation. But people around here drink a lot. That's the bad part. And there's a lot of fighting that goes on at night. You can always hear people yelling and screaming and banging in the middle of the night when you are trying to go to sleep. Sometimes the fighting is unbearable. You can't fall asleep.

M + R

Nathaniel Pinto

I live right over here in one of these houses. My two little sisters are in the Community Action for Children and Youth [CACY] Program, which provides after-school activities for kids. They do art projects, and they play games. I used to work here at the Chapter House, with the kids in the CACY Program. I also have two brothers, but I don't really get along with them. One is 18. He's in jail. He's done some bad stuff, but he's in there now because he didn't obey his probation officer. He'll be in for a few more months. My other brother is 22. He just got out, too, for stealing a car. My dad is also in jail for auto theft and for drinking and wrecking the car that he stole.

Photo by Bob Winsett

So my mom and I are going through bad financial problems. She recently got her knee operated on, so she stays at home. They won't let her work. My mom gets financial assistance from the Chapter. I live with my mom and two sisters, but for the past two months, I haven't stayed with them. I dunno — I just had to get out of here. It's all the stress of what my dad is doing, what my brothers are doing, and what my dad put my mom through. I just can't handle being around any of them. I've realized that they are not very good for me. So I sometimes stay with my Nelly (my dad's mom) or with my uncle. I just stay wherever I can. I am so angry with my dad. I'm so mad that I don't even want to talk with him or see him again. He told me that he would stop drinking and I believed him. He obviously never did, and the next thing I know, he's in jail.

People around here drink because they are depressed or something. They just want to lose their mind or something. I used to drink, but I stopped. I was drinking with my uncle, and he cracked up a car by going 95 mph when I was in the car. My brother went through the windshield, and I also got hurt.

This is what got me to volunteer with the fire department. They had a career thing going on, and one of the guys told me about it and I decided to check it out. I ended up doing it and it's changed my life all the way around. I went from being a bad little boy to a very good boy. I've gotten to go to places like Colorado to train and stuff. I don't drive the truck, but I ride on it. I can't believe the stuff that I see — the fires and the accidents. It's so exciting, and it feels so good to help. I now have a nice personality. I'm completely changed. I'm nice to people, and they are nice to me. I can open up, and that feels really good. I also help the younger kids around here.

My uncle and aunt (not blood relatives) work at this Chapter House. Danny is the Chapter coordinator. He's the one who got me through what I was going through. He's a really good guy. He's like a second dad to me. He forces me to do stuff that I don't want to do — like homework. He's real smart like that —he's real smart. He's pretty cool to hang out with too. People here think he's superior, but he's just cool. His wife is cool, too. She's like my second mom. After school, I usually come to this Chapter House. I really treat this place like home, and the people around here are my family. They also treat me the way that I've always wanted to be treated.

Did you know . . .

During 1995-97, 22.2 percent of American Indian households were hungry or on the edge of hunger. This is more than two times the number in the overall US population. [54]

Also, in a survey of 48 tribes, only 39 percent of rural households had telephones, 9 percent had personal computers, 8 percent had Internet access, 12 percent lacked electricity, and 23 percent lacked gas service. [55]

Focus on the

Navajo Reservation

A home on the Navajo Reservation, New Mexico

Photo by Bob Winsett

The Navajo Nation is the biggest American Indian reservation in the United States — larger in area than West Virginia — with a 2000 population of 173,600 people, a 21 percent increase since 1990.[56] Spanning many centuries, its history is filled with social and racial oppression, annihilation, and cultural destruction. After years of fighting over land and countless negotiations and treaties with the US government, the Navajo Nation was formed in 1863 after losing a military campaign to the United States that was led by Kit Carson. In 1864, more than 9,000 Navajos were forced to take what came to be known as "the Long Walk" — 300 miles from Arizona to Fort Sumner, New Mexico, where they were confined until 1868, when the military met with Navajo leaders and offered a treaty: the US would set apart land to allow the 7,000 surviving Navajos to return home. Additions have since been made to the original land to form today's reservation.

Other provisions of the treaty have never been carried out. For example, in exchange for the lands forfeited by the Navajos, the government agreed to care for the people, their health, welfare, and education. Originally a school and a teacher were to be provided for every 30 Navajo students. Instead, the United States imposed damaging policies on the Navajo, such as boarding schools, which required most children to be placed, sometimes forcibly, in schools often hours away where they were not allowed to speak their native language, resulting eventually in cultural annihilation.

Isolation remains a big challenge on the reservation. In 1999, only 30 percent of Navajo homes had telephones,[57] and even fewer had computers and Internet access. In addition, schools are often far from home, making two-hour bus rides common for many children. Social service agencies and youth organizations are often absent in these remote areas, and those that do exist often attract only those children who live close to the center. With little public transportation, attending after-school programs remains a challenge for many children.

SNAPSHOT: McKinley County, New Mexico

These statistics depict a typical county on the Navajo Reservation.

2000 population	74,800 (75% American Indian)
Children 0-17 living in poverty (1999)	42.6%
High school graduates (over 25 years old)	approximately 24%
College graduates (over 25 years old)	approximately 5%
Median household income (1997)	$21,681
% births to single mothers (1999)	67%
% enrolled in Medicaid (1999)	26%
Source: US Census Bureau, State and County Quickfacts, 2000.	

Did you know . . .

A great effort is now being made by many tribes to teach children their language and culture so its continuity can remain intact. According to Lucille Yellowman, the coordinator of the Community Action for Children and Youth in Nenahnezad, New Mexico, "The entire foundation of our children's program is Navajo culture. At this center, we teach the children their clans, their directions, the four sacred mountains, their colors and numbers in Navajo. If they don't learn this here, they probably would never learn it at home."

> ***"It's interesting being American Indian. We think and feel the same as everyone else, we just may do things differently. We have sweat lodges and prayer meetings and we have pow-wows. I don't think of myself as being different. We are all people. I think that one of the most important things about preserving my culture is making others understand it. I like telling people I meet about my culture and how I grew up. It's very different for most of them, but then more people will understand the differences and what it's like to be American Indian."***
>
> **— Tyson Manning, 19 years old, Shoshone Tribe, Duck Valley Reservation, Nevada**

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Hope Grigsby:

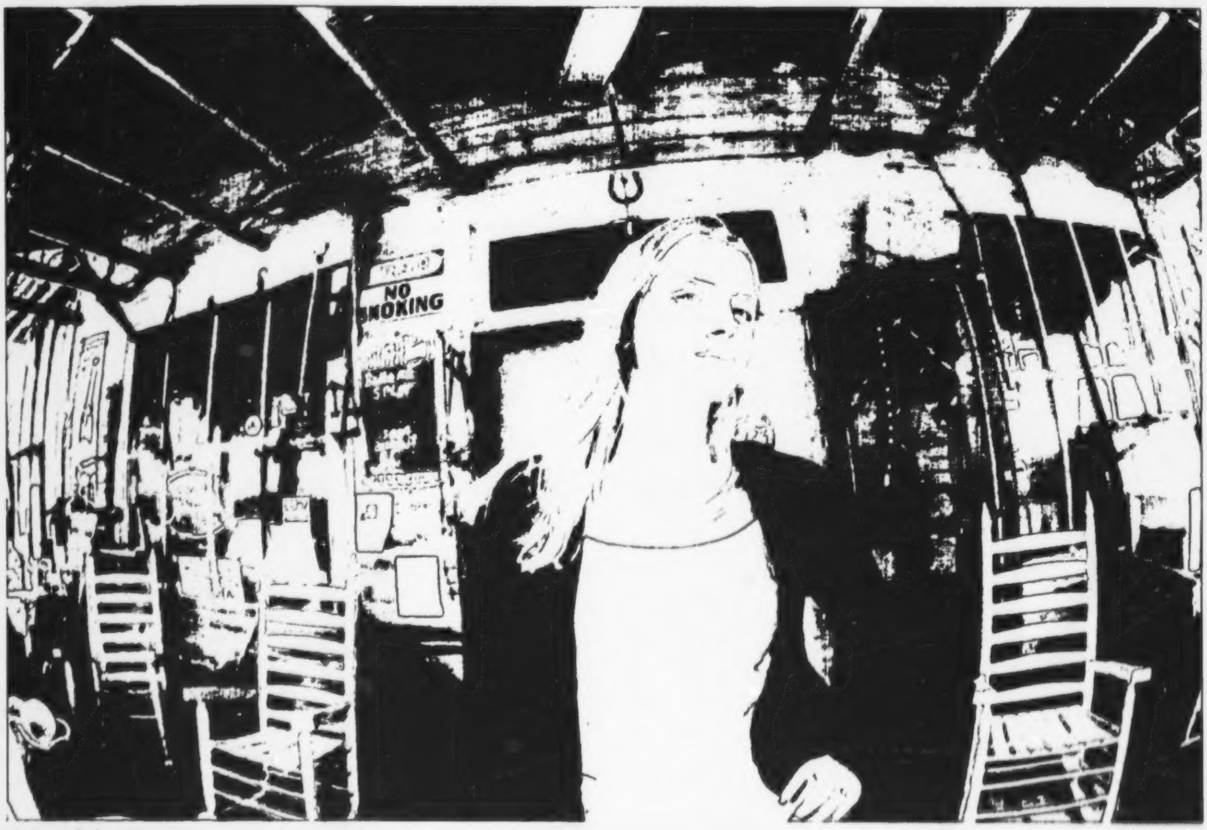
The Power of Activism

Hope Grigsby is a 16-year-old self-proclaimed activist. Her isolated community of Lotts Creek is nestled in the mountains of Knott County, Kentucky, miles from the nearest store or business. Through the efforts of a caring teacher, the students of Cordia School, the only small community school remaining, learned that they have a voice that can be used to create change in their community. This confidence empowered a group of young people, who see all too often the hopelessness caused by decades of poverty and despair, to take action. Hope's story speaks to the power of offering young people opportunities that enable them to express themselves and to realize that they can play a role in moving their generation out of the shadows of the past.

I am proud to be an activist. I started becoming involved in the number 4 coal issue when I was 15 years old. A man from the Kentuckians for the Commonwealth came to our school, trying to get things going up in Kelly Fork. He was trying to stop a permit, which gave the Diamond Mae Coal Company authority to mine Kelly Fork. I was aware of the water issue but never thought that, as a kid, I could do much about it. Finding out that I had a voice and that I could make a difference gave me a whole new way to view my life.

Kelly Fork is right above my house, and I have lots of friends who live there. Since the Diamond Mae Coal Company came in to mine Kelly Fork, bad things have been happening to our entire community. The company came in with no concern about the effect on people's lives. I became an activist because I see and smell our water and because I know that we can't drink this water. Oh gosh, on any given day we can turn on our faucets and sometimes the water is crystal clear. Other days it looks gray and dingy, and other days there is so much oil in it that it's completely purple or even black. Because of the mining, our water tables have shifted. We used to have white sulfur and now we have red sulfur. It smells like rotten eggs — it's really, really nasty. It's so foul that when we turn on our faucets, we often have to leave the room. The coal company doesn't care that we can't drink our water or even bathe in our water. They don't have to look at it, or smell it or drink it. They don't have to drive long distances just to buy bottled water. After all, isn't water supposed to be free and available to all people? Just because we are poor and from the mountains, aren't we entitled to clean water? I know that mining puts a lot of people to work in our area and it is our biggest industry — but can't the coal companies have some consideration for the people who live on or near the mountain?

I was disturbed when I first heard about the number 4 coal issue, and I got in my head that maybe me and my friends could make a difference. With help from one of my teachers, we organized a protest and got a bus to take us to Frankfort to fight this battle. I'm an outspoken girl, and I never really knew what a powerful voice I had. We came to Frankfort prepared with signs, chants and bottles of dirty water that we got from our own faucets. We were determined to put water back on Kelly Fork. When we arrived in Frankfort, we didn't know what to expect. There were news people all over the place. I thought, "O my gosh," I just wanted to crawl back on that bus. I was so nervous. I didn't crawl back because everyone was looking to me as their leader. We started chanting, "If you mine the number 4, Kelly Fork will be no more. Shut the door on number 4. Shut the door on number 4." We got out our signs and banners. I got out my jar of water that looked like there was three inches of oil in it. We were stomping and chanting.



Hope Grigsby

Photo by Bob Winsett

Finally a man who worked for the Department of Surface Mining invited us in. He told us that there was not much that could be done — that the mining of Kelly Fork would continue. Several of my friends started screaming. I became very upset. I felt like my chest was caving in. I took a few deep breaths and asked again if he would hold the permit and help us. He told us that he was sorry, that he couldn't do that. We were so upset because it was clear that none of them really cared about us. We were teens and were trying desperately to help our community. Yet even our government would not help — even they didn't care. In the end, the Diamond Mae Coal Company promised that they would provide money to pipe city water into Kelly Fork. Although we couldn't stop the mining, we felt a victory, knowing that at least we would get clean water. The sad thing about this is that after one year, we still don't have our water. I think that they just wanted to appease us. The coal company obviously did not live up to their word.

Although we still have undrinkable water, something really good came out of all this. As kids, we learned that we could work together as a unified force to make change. I've realized that you don't have to be an adult to be an activist and to make a difference. You can be just one voice and your one little voice can make a big difference. Forty kids and twelve adults went to Frankfort to fight for something that we deeply believed was right. And we will have that day to remember for the rest of our lives.

Did you know. . .

In Letcher County, Kentucky, an estimated 3,000 homes still use an antiquated system of discharging raw waste products into rivers and creeks. [58]

A Jewel in the Mountains: One Community School

In a decade of educational reform in Kentucky, the Cordia School, where Hope Grigsby is a student, stands as testimony to the benefits of maintaining small community schools.

The school was started in 1933 in the home of Alice Stone, who returned to Lotts Creek after studying in Ohio. Bringing with her a solid group of financial supporters, Stone raised the funds for the first school building in the 1940s. "From the beginning, this was truly a community school, and the school gave everyone a great reason to work together. The community donated the logs for our first building, and everyone helped in the construction," said Alice Whittaker, Stone's niece and the school's current principal.

For many years, the school prospered. But in the early 1990s, the state approached Stone and gave her the choice of consolidating the school or raising private funds to build a new one to replace the original structure, which was in disrepair. Stone and Whittaker began a massive drive to raise the money for a modern building. With the help of the community and outside supporters, the building was completed in 1996 and is now a symbol of hope and community pride.

With family incomes so low that more than 72 percent of the children qualify for free and reduced-price school lunches, Cordia exemplifies the benefits of a small school. In a county where only about 25 percent of all people over 25 are high school graduates,[59] nearly 100 percent of the seniors attending Cordia graduated in 2001.

Many of the teachers are themselves Cordia graduates, and the school is one of the biggest employers in the area. As we learned from Hope, this school offers some special opportunities because the teachers are so involved in all aspects of the children's lives and provide academic support and personal attention both in and out of the classroom. As a result, there are few discipline problems and, according to Whittaker, ***"the kids generally turn out good. Many even go on to graduate school and are being trained in medicine, nursing, physical therapy — all professions that are desperately needed in this region. And many of them do return to the area."***

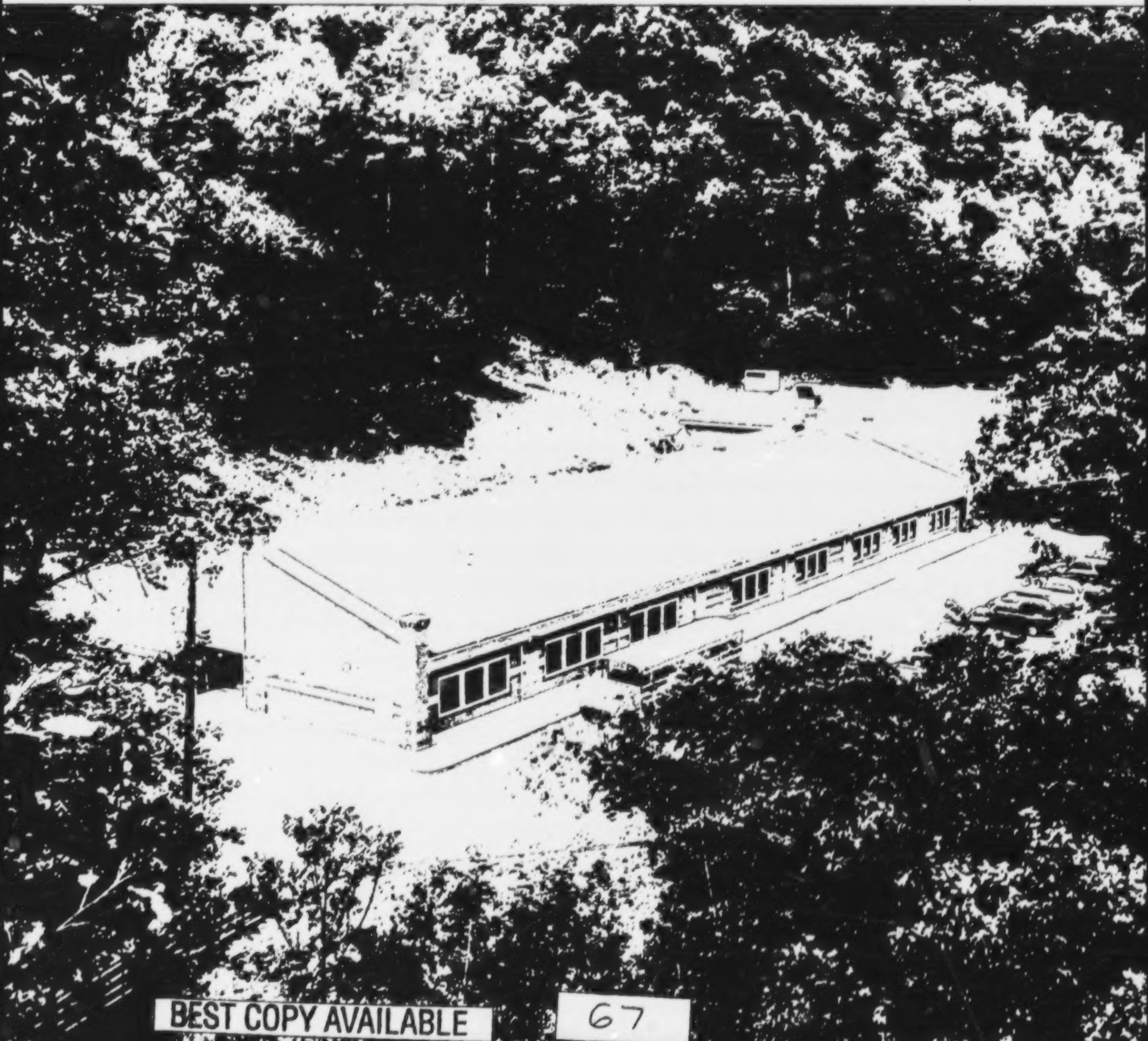
The Loss of a Sense of Place

In addition to the negative effects on students, the loss of the community school in rural areas can be equated with the loss of a sense of community. According to one activist, Michael Tierney, from Big Ugly Creek, West Virginia, *"There is something very powerful about the sense of place in rural communities that helps them transcend the challenges of poor infrastructure and few resources. The context of roots and an unquestionable commitment to neighbors and kin allows people to build their own informal means of support, whether it be responding to personal or community crisis, or the long term watchfulness that helps children grow up. When schools are ripped out of the community in the name of efficiency, there is literally no public place to serve as the crossroads for those individual and family efforts. The loss of a school literally means the loss of any sense of public, civic community."*

> ***"The distrust of the big schools within poor communities is profound. The kids experience long bus rides to and from school, the school environment is depersonalized and intimidating, and the cultures between the rich and poor kids are very different."***
>
> — Ronald Eller, Appalachian historian
> and former director of the Appalachian Center,
> University of Kentucky

Cordia Community School, Lotts Creek, Kentucky

Photo by Bob Winsett



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Shaneesa Mills:

The Cry for Help on the Reservation

Pipper Mills Photo by Bob Winsett

Shaneesa (Pipper) Mills is a 14-year-old 9th grader from Farmington, New Mexico. Although she does not live on the Navajo Reservation, she is keenly aware of its high incidence of alcoholism and is committed to helping the young people who suffer from the harsh life of being children of alcoholics. After working at a summer program for children and young teens on the reservation, she saw first-hand the emotional toll this takes on the children. She decided to try to help by starting an Alateen program. In addition to this work, Pipper holds the distinction of being the first alternate to Miss Northern Navajo Teen, a title that takes her across the northern part of the reservation to represent her peers. In addition, she recently won the title of the Fourth of July Pow-Wow Princess in Port Duchane, Utah.

I came here to start an Alateen program because so many kids have parents who abuse alcohol. *Actually, most of the kids.* They need somewhere to go to talk about this. All the drinking around here — it's really hurting the kids. A little girl yesterday told me that her daddy was drunk and he abused her. You know, he raped her. I was so hurt for her and didn't know what to say. I asked her if her mom knew. She said that she knew, but that her parents are divorced. She's only 10. There's no one here to talk to about stuff like this. She needed to talk and I was there, but I didn't know what to do for her. I just felt so badly. Another little girl told me that every member of her family drinks and she hates it because it's really abusive in her house — the fighting and all that. I just think that if there is a place to go to talk about it and share problems, that this would be a good thing.

So I got in touch with the state Alateen office in Albuquerque and worked out a weekly support group that will begin this fall. I know that kids will come. They all start to drink here at such a young age because they see so much of this all around them. They see their parents and grandparents doing it, they think it's okay for them to do too. People around here drink to get rid of their problems. A lot of Navajo kids are very shy and they won't speak up for themselves — even if they have something important to say. The reservation is like that too, it's part of the culture. But I can tell you one thing — there are so many hurting kids around here.

ALCOHOLISM: A Chronic Issue for American Indians

As we've heard from several American Indian youth, alcohol is a chronic problem on the reservations. In fact, its roots go back more than 500 years, to the initial contacts made by the American Indians with the European settlers in North America. The European invasion brought enormous stress to the native people, who had lived quietly for thousands of years. Early accounts are full of references to how the Europeans created a strong demand for alcohol by using it as a medium of trade, often exchanging it for animal skins. Since literature has found no oral recollections of alcohol use in nonceremonial settings before the Europeans arrived, this period of history may have seen the introduction of alcohol into the native population. The years of American Indian oppression, racism, and genocide might also have strongly contributed to a culture that includes alcohol.

Research confirms that American Indians have suffered not only the stigma of alcoholism, but also the damaging impact of alcohol-related problems. Compared with the general US population, American Indians are at high risk for problems caused by alcohol abuse. An analysis of 1991-93 data from the National Household Survey on Drug Abuse shows that American Indians have the highest prevalence of illicit drug and alcohol abuse (19.8 percent age 12 and older) of the 12 racial and ethnic subgroups studied in the survey, and a significantly higher prevalence than the general population (12 percent). This higher incidence is also seen in the data for hospital discharges. In 1997, the rate for discharges with a first-listed diagnosis of alcoholism was 1.6 times higher for the Indian Health Service (IHS) and Tribal Hospitals than for general short-stay hospitals.[60] This might explain why alcohol-related fatal automobile accidents are three times more prevalent in the American Indian population as in the general population, and alcohol-related suicide is 1.4 times as prevalent. According to the IHS records, the age-adjusted alcohol-related death rate in 1992 was 5.6 times higher among the American Indian population than the US general population, and chronic liver disease and cirrhosis were 3.9 times greater.[61]

> ***“I really wish that my dad would stop drinking, and sometimes I ask him to just stop and he says he will stop, but he doesn't. It gets me so mad. I've seen what it can do to people and I'll never drink. In my dad's case, he doesn't have a home or a car or anything. People on the reservation probably drink because there is nothing else to do. Kids here drink, and they smoke weed too.”***
>
> **— Rene, 14 years old, Navajo Reservation**

Did you know . . .

American Indian youth were 3.5 times more likely to have tried marijuana, 5.8 times more likely to have tried stimulants, and 8.3 times more likely to have tried heroin than were young people in a nationwide sample.[62]

The Voice of Clifton:

The Power Within

Clifton Sutton is a high school senior from Duncan, Mississippi, who is thriving despite living in an isolated, poverty-stricken rural community with a broken family. His father died when he was young, and his disabled mother recently moved to Memphis, leaving Clifton and his sisters with various aunts. Under the positive influence of adult mentors and an incredible vision and personal commitment, Clifton has become a community leader. His story is one of resilience and demonstrates how young people, with the support of caring adults and constructive activities, can thrive in the face of adversity. We have seen that young people, given a voice and the ability to contribute, can become important community leaders. Whether or not Clifton ultimately settles in Duncan, his desire to address the problems in his community and articulate what's needed can be powerful forces in the process of community change.

Clifton Sutton Photo by Kate Lapides

I was raised in Memphis and moved here when I was 10. I've lived here most of my life and have been attached to Duncan, but there are some things that I would like to see changed. For example, I get ready to play basketball, but you can die of a heat stroke playing in this heat. It would be great to have an indoor gym here. Duncan has a lot of people who don't make much money. I'd like to see more money here. If we could bring say a Wal-Mart or other business, it would put people to work. That would draw more people here. You see, there are only about 500 people who live here. If we could have more funds, the town would expand. We go to a very small school. I'd like to see more in it, technology-wise. I'd like to see a sufficient computer lab, a sufficient biology and chemistry lab in the school. Right now there are only two computers in each classroom and there are over 25 students. When it's time for research papers to be done, there are not enough computers for everyone. Most kids do not have computers at home so they should be able to get their work done at school. But all the classrooms are locked after school hours. We have to go to Delta State sometimes just to use a computer, and that's if we can get a ride because it's not close by!

The best thing at my school is the after-school tutoring program. I was a tutor and I helped other kids study for tests and stuff. Last year the test scores went up in my class. After-school programs are very important, but the funds for these are short. There seems to be enough money for our sports teams, and they are always very good but the academic program is not. It shouldn't be that way and I'd like this switched in reverse because I could be the best defensive tackle, but if I can't add two plus two, I'll never get a job.

I live with my aunt and uncle. My mom wanted to move to Memphis and it's my senior year and I want to finish up in my school. My roots are in Duncan, you know. I just want to put attention into Duncan, to see what needs to be changed here and what I can do to be of help. I've become very attached to Duncan. I wanted to stay here.

The greatest adult influence in my life has to be [pause] I would have to say, Mr. Casper Hall. He's the principal at the elementary school here. Whatever I do, he's right there to help me. He's like, "Listen son, I know you can do it, just do your best and I'm behind you." And this other guy, he's a minister, Reverend Jeffrey Butler. We go to church all the time and he's always encouraging me, giving me advice and he's like more of a personal friend. Basically Mr. Hall and Mr. Butler have been there for me since I've known them and I really respect that. They are dedicated to helping kids, not just me, but other kids. I can always talk to them.

I guess I was born with a lot of energy. I think it was God-given. Since I was little, I've always known what I want. I've always wanted to go to Memphis State and I will go. My drive is just built inside of me. If I want to do something in life, I don't feel that I've lived until I've done that certain thing. One of the keys to energy is motivation. I have to stay determined — to stick to what I'm doing and work hard, you know. If you are motivated within yourself, you can't expect someone else to motivate you.

I see two different sides to life. My thing is, hey, I want the better things in life. I guess that other kids have a different perspective. I guess they say that they're enjoying themselves. I see kids around here doing lots of stuff. There are lots of kids my age who drink. The only thing it does is destroy your insides and I want to keep my insides. Smoking — there are kids my age who smoke. But they see something they enjoy and they want to do it. But the reason they do these things is because they have nothing else to do. Or maybe they have no one pushing them. And some of their parents are doing the same stuff. They have nobody backing them up. I think it's real important to have someone to back you up in life.

Another big problem we face is teen pregnancy. We have a lot of kids, young teenagers, having sex. They are not prepared to take care of their kids — they are just kids themselves. I think that what we need here is a way to bring the young people together for something positive. We need a youth center where kids could come after school. We need interesting things for them to do so that they can stay out of trouble. This could also draw adults together when they get involved with their kids. A youth center would have a great effect on this community.

I'm very interested in improving this community. We need so much here. We've had a few meetings with local politicians and county officials. Some people came here from out of town to see what needs to be changed here. I was on the program and I told them that I wanted to see Duncan grow. I also met another guy who can help me to write grants. I feel like I have some political support to get things done around here.

My advice to other kids around here is number one, to pray for change. Number two — you need to have a vision. If you don't have a vision, you don't know where you are going. Have a dream and follow it. And keep doing everything that you need to do so that you can make that dream come true. My dream is to — ah — to become financially stable and to be able to give back to Duncan. I could start something here that would help this place.

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Save the Children

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SUMMING UP:

Learning From the Young People

The interviews in Part Two show the effect of poverty on young lives. But they also show that caring adults and community organizations can give young people the opportunity to break out of poverty.

JoJo*, the child of a substance-abusing father and disabled mother, credits the chess club with building his self-esteem, keeping him in school, and expanding his horizons. Vianna claims that her participation in the FFA helped her improve her grades and develop leadership skills. Although his stepfather's substance abuse and mother's poor health caused stress in his family, Nathaniel found caring adults at a community center run by his tribe, saying, ***"I really treat this place like home, and the people around here are my family. They also treat me the way that I've always wanted to be treated."***

Unfortunately, most poor children in these communities have few options for constructive activities after school. As Isaac, living in Appalachia, puts it: "There is really nothing to do. This center is the only place around where kids can come after school.... Without positive activities, kids get into trouble. They go on top of the strip mines and have parties and get drunk." Tommiea, miles away in the rural South, echoes his views as she reflects on why "so many little girls around here get pregnant": ***"I'm convinced it's because they have nothing else to do."***

Several of these young people, living in communities with poor schools, discuss the importance of a good education. As Clifton says, ***"There seems to be enough money for our sports teams, and they are always very good, but the academic program is not. I could be the best defensive tackle, but if I can't add two plus two, I'll never get a job."***

Finally, these young people demonstrate how giving back empowers them to improve their own lives. Nathaniel, after a serious car accident, joined the volunteer fire department and tells us, ***"It's changed my life all the way around. I went from being a bad little boy to a very good boy."*** Once young people experience themselves as change agents, they learn a lesson for life and become important community assets. Clifton, who worked as a tutor in his school, tells us: ***"I'm very interested in improving the community... My dream is to become financially stable and to be able to give back to Duncan. I could start something here that would help this place."*** And as Hope from rural Kentucky says, ***"You can be just one voice and your one little voice can make a big difference."***

The ability of these young people to succeed is hopeful. Despite these stories, however, those of many others don't have a happy ending, often because the children lack the resources of their more fortunate peers. It's time to look at why, in a nation rich with resources, so many children remain deprived.

PART THREE

CALL TO ACTION

Family at home in Marks, Mississippi

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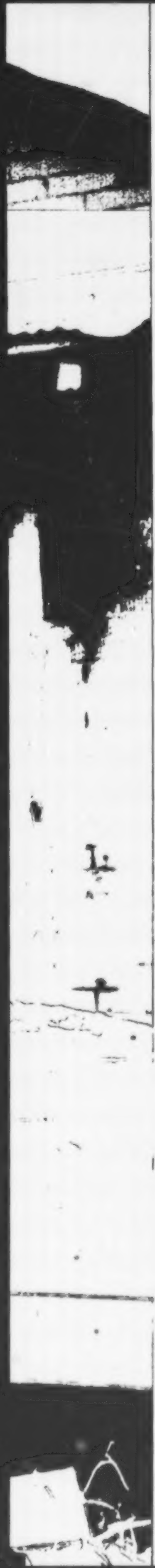


Photo by Kate Lapides

The following strategies build upon extensive statistical research on rural child poverty and numerous interviews with families, children, community leaders, and child service providers in the rural communities that we visited, as well as 70 years of Save the Children experience in community development work in rural America. The Blue Ribbon Panel we assembled to provide advice and guidance on this report agreed that money alone will not solve the problems for children living in these rural pockets of poverty. The Panel urged analysis of the fundamental reasons that poverty has been so persistent in these areas, why the current efforts have not been as effective as possible, and encouraged us to determine the best strategies to break the cycle of poverty for these children. We believe that the following four strategies, and accompanying recommendations, will create real and lasting positive change for America's forgotten children:

- Build human capital.
  Train, attract, and keep people serving rural America. Provide incentives to reverse the "brain drain," train the people who are already in the community, and attract people with the skills needed to serve children.
- Create new community institutions.
  Create and strengthen comprehensive community centers and other places that serve children and youth.
- Strengthen the economic self-sufficiency of families.
  Ensure that welfare-to-work and other policies make the needs of children a priority.
- Increase resources to eliminate rural poverty.
  Target and increase public and private investments specifically for the poorest rural children.

We know we can change the outcomes for the 2.5 million poor children in rural America. It requires the collective will, focus, and involvement of federal, tribal, state, and local governments, businesses, institutions of higher education, nonprofit organizations, religious groups, community leaders, and young people themselves. Policymakers, the press, and the public must join the commitment to build these communities and support the children.

In addition to the recommendations that accompany the four strategies, we have prepared an independent companion document. It will contain specific legislative proposals, as well as suggested policies and procedures for other major sectors of society.

Build Human Capital

Train, attract, and keep people serving rural America. Provide incentives to reverse the "brain drain," train the people who are already in the community, and attract people with the skills needed to help serve children.

- Help young people finish high school and attend college by providing programs that promote higher education throughout childhood and adolescence.
- Reverse the "brain drain" by strengthening young people's connections to the community and stimulating their interest in staying by:
  - Supporting young entrepreneurs — both business and social entrepreneurs — who will in turn create jobs and services for rural families;
  - Expanding and targeting federal and state funds for service programs, particularly those of the Corporation for National and Community Service, to reach the areas most in need, to ensure that rural youth engage in service that furthers their academic learning; and to help those providing service attend college and develop job skills;
  - Supporting programs that expose young people to the professional world, such as mentoring programs, internships, and job skills programs; and
  - Identifying leaders in the poorest rural communities and assisting them through leadership training programs, and assistance from supporting organizations that will help them develop their skills, expand their networks, and enhance their ability to lead.
- Expand programs that develop, attract, and retain skilled professionals who will work with children in underserved rural areas, that:
  - Provide additional incentives for professionals to serve those communities;
  - Recruit individuals from poor rural communities to participate in professional training programs; and
  - Increase the use of technology to expand professional development opportunities available to rural residents.

Discussion

Most rural communities have local leaders who do the best they can with limited resources. Their presence is essential in generating and mobilizing resources, attracting funds from outside sources, and holding elected officials accountable for their decisions. But to be maximally effective, they need training, guidance, and access to new resources and connections.

Communities also need to ensure that young people in the area are developing the entrepreneurial and leadership skills that will enable them to become strong leaders in the future, a process that begins with a good education. Children in rural pockets of poverty frequently have no incentive to finish high school and have few opportunities to either attend college or receive professional training. When they do receive a college education, they are often lured to areas that have more job opportunities with better pay. This has resulted in a severe "brain drain" that perpetuates the cycle of poverty by depriving poor rural areas of the skills and creativity of those most likely to effect change. At the same time, it has been extremely difficult for these rural areas to attract and retain skilled people from outside the community, resulting in many shortages that are felt by children and families. Here's what should happen.

Help young people finish high school and attend college by providing programs that promote higher education throughout childhood and adolescence.

For many poor rural children, finishing high school and going to college do not seem to be realistic goals. Their parents and friends left school and got low-paying jobs early in life, and the cost of higher education presents an imposing barrier. There are programs, however, that have been successful in breaking this cycle. Efforts to promote the idea of college, raise awareness about financial aid opportunities, and ensure that students have access to a college preparatory curriculum should begin during middle and high school. The US Department of Education programs that prepare disadvantaged young people for college, such as Upward Bound and Gear Up, should be more available in rural areas and complemented by similar efforts supported by community leaders, schools, businesses, and foundations. While scholarship aid is important, if young people are not academically and emotionally prepared for college, even the most generous scholarship cannot make it a reality.

Reverse the "brain drain" by strengthening young people's connections to the community and stimulating their interest in staying.

Expanding access to higher education is only part of the answer. More must be done to strengthen young people's connections to their communities and their interest in returning after college. Promising strategies include service-learning and youth leadership programs that offer experience, build a range of skills, and give young people an opportunity to invest in their community. For example, in Rutland, South Dakota, a town of only 200 people, an enterprising group of high school students learned math, management, and other skills by running their own business — a convenience store the community needed. Young entrepreneurs — both business and social entrepreneurs who create innovative new programs to solve community problems — will in turn create jobs and services that will improve the lives of families.

In addition, leaders in the poorest rural communities must be identified and and assisted through leadership training programs. We also must support organizations that will help them develop their skills, expand their networks, and improve their ability to lead.

To build a community support system that works, strong, accountable leaders who are close to their communities must be trained, whether they are elected officials, advocates, or organization heads. Programs like the Pew Civic Entrepreneurs Initiative, the Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation's Grassroots Leadership Development program, and the W. K. Kellogg Foundation Leadership Program (which ended recently after three decades) have helped enormously in developing civic leaders. Such programs must ensure that people of color in rural communities are recruited and selected for participation, and that participants learn a range of leadership styles that will enable them to be successful in their own cultural contexts.

Rural leaders can benefit from the expertise of intermediary organizations that are familiar with their issues and that can provide training, advice, and support. Such organizations may also provide support in the form of technical assistance, new resources, access to networks, or broader knowledge of key issues. By bridging critical knowledge and resource gaps, they are central to any strategy to build the leadership base of rural America.

> ***"We have to start with our young people. The problem is they are not involved in political leadership and many end up leaving the reservation. So I started a Young Alumni Group in our Chapter to give the young people a voice. I hold our meetings in Navajo and English so they can participate. Over 50 elders and 50 young people attended the last meeting and they are becoming very involved."***
>
> **— Alvin Smith, Chapter President, Nahodishgish Chapter, Crownpoint, New Mexico**

Did you know . . .

Of those who move out of rural areas, more are educated young adults who leave for college and jobs in bigger cities. The rates of people moving into rural areas are highest among people without a high school diploma. The net migration of college-educated people into rural areas dropped to near zero during 1998–2000. These figures illustrate the "brain drain" of some of the brightest from rural to urban areas, leaving rural areas with less educated and less skilled individuals.[63]

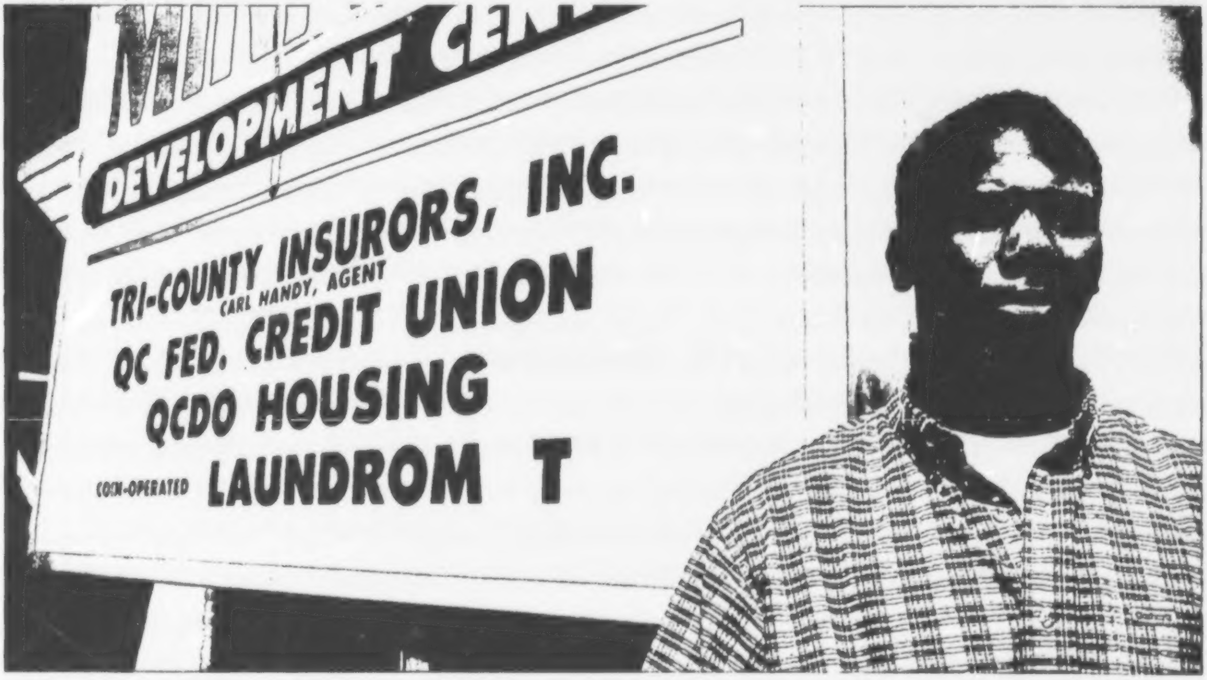
Jackson Promotes Community Development

One leader who has brought resources to his community is Robert Jackson, who was born and raised in Quitman County, Mississippi, where the per-capita income of African Americans is $3,600 a year. His desire to improve the lives of others led him to become a Kellogg Fellow and create the Quitman County Development Organization (see photo below), which houses a community development credit union, an independent insurance agency, a housing development project, a coin-operated laundry, and a day care center. Among its many programs is a day care center on the high school campus, making it possible for teen mothers to complete high school, and a credit union led and run by youth to encourage and train young people to save, invest, and manage financial assets. According to Glenn Clay, a recent credit union president, "*Being on the board of the credit union was a good opportunity because it kept me out of trouble. I wasn't a bad kid, but there wasn't enough to do, and you can always find trouble. The credit union taught me about finance, money, loans, and how to be a teller. As president, I learned a lot about decision-making and leadership.*"

Wanted: Local Leaders to Advocate on Behalf of Children

An example of an organization focused on building human capital in rural communities is the Rural School and Community Trust, which works in more than 30 states to improve rural education. The capacity-building program of the Rural Trust builds school and community leadership in rural areas through its programs of "place-based" learning. Students in schools supported by the Rural Trust engage in challenging academic work using their community as a laboratory for learning. Teachers, students and community members design projects connected to the community's history, culture, ecology, or economy. The result? Young people who understand the potential of their community and know what it means to be an active citizen.

Photo by Kate Lapides



Craven Cook, outside the Quitman County Development Organization, Marks, Mississippi

Expand programs that develop, attract, and retain skilled professionals who will work with children in underserved rural areas.

The "brain drain" has exacerbated the shortage of service providers in a number of critical fields, including:

- ***Health professionals.*** Many rural hospitals have closed in recent years, leaving communities with limited access to health care and adding to the difficulty of attracting health care professionals. Thus, these communities have few specialized physicians and mental health care providers. Shortages of specialized physicians and mental health care providers have a major impact on the quality of health care in poor rural areas.
- ***Education professionals.*** Isolated communities have difficulty attracting and retaining teachers, particularly those who have credentials in several subject areas, special education teachers, and teachers for English as a Second Language (ESL) programs and bilingual education — who are increasingly important as the number of immigrant families moving to rural areas grows.
- ***Early childhood and youth development professionals.*** Most rural early childhood and after-school providers lack the resources to attract trained staff or to provide professional development opportunities to those they do hire.

These shortages — of health care, education, and child development professionals — place children at risk. Addressing them may involve recruiting professionals from outside the area, using such incentives as scholarships and loan forgiveness, or special programs, such as Teach for America (an AmeriCorps program that recruits and trains recent college graduates for hard-to-fill teaching positions) and the Commission Corps (which provides health care and related services to medically underserved populations, including American Indian reservations).

A Leadership Preparation Program Trains Strong Administrators

An innovative program at Mississippi's Delta State University addresses the shortage of qualified educators by recruiting and training strong school administrators who can attract good teachers. The participants are teachers with a minimum of three years of experience. The state treats the program as a sabbatical, so participants are paid their full salary. Graduates commit to staying in the region for a minimum of five years, and most are hired as assistant principals, on track to fill positions for new principals as they arise.

"We have a rough school system, and I think we deserve to have good teachers here, like other schools in the US. But this year we didn't have an English 4 teacher. And the substitutes, who came in to try to teach us, had no idea about what we were supposed to be learning and what we needed for our first year of college. I think that shouldn't have happened. . . . This fall, us seniors who are planning to go to college are going to be so far behind."

— Craven Cook, Marks, Mississippi

AmeriCorps supports additional programs to increase the supply of teachers, health outreach workers, lawyers, and child care professionals in areas that need them. Other promising strategies include locally provided incentives, such as low-cost mortgages and housing, interest-free car loans, subsidized child care, and improving salaries and benefits so that the compensation of rural professionals is competitive with that of their suburban peers.

Recruiting and training residents of rural areas has also been an effective strategy to ensure a supply of skilled professionals in a variety of fields. With ties to the community, locally recruited individuals are more likely to stay and provide culturally appropriate services. Well-trained and supervised paraprofessionals and volunteers can also help to expand available services and free skilled professionals to serve more people. Because they serve full-time and are encouraged to recruit part-time volunteers, AmeriCorps members are an important asset to rural communities.

Finally, today's technology has created a world of possibilities for isolated rural areas to address shortages of skilled service providers. Telemedicine has improved the quality of health care and addressed transportation problems in some communities. For example, the Oregon Child Abuse Telemedicine Project can transmit images to specialists so that rural health care providers can receive help in evaluating, diagnosing, and treating a problem.

Distance learning offers individuals the opportunity to attend college, take advanced high school courses, obtain job training, or upgrade professional skills. For example, the Kentucky Migrant Technology Program serves migrant students by providing CD-ROMs in Spanish and English and developing middle and high school courses that use Internet technologies in conjunction with national education standards. And to upgrade the skills of early childhood professionals, the National Association of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies offers a virtual university, including options for obtaining degrees from a credentialed institution, while the National Head Start Association provides courses via satellite through its Heads Up network.

Unfortunately, many rural areas have been unable to take advantage of these opportunities. One of the most important efforts to bridge the digital divide has been the e-Rate, which enables rural schools and libraries to purchase discounted telecommunications services. Other government programs include Link Up and Lifeline, which reduce the telephone fees for low-income consumers, the Department of Education's Community Technology Center program, and the Department of Commerce's Technology Opportunity Program.

Maternal-Infant Health Outreach Worker Patricia Bolton making a home visit in White Oak, Tennessee

Photo by Susan Warner

Parents Helping Parents

Currently in 23 communities in Appalachia and the Mississippi River Delta, the Maternal-Infant Health Outreach Worker (MIHOW) program successfully addresses the shortage of skilled health care providers in rural communities while demonstrating how committed local people, regardless of their level of formal schooling, can significantly enhance children's lives.

Based at Vanderbilt University, the program operates in partnership with clinics and private organizations in communities where services are provided. The local partners identify parents who have successfully raised their own children and have a passion for learning and compassion for others. Vanderbilt trains these men and women to work with families by teaching them about prenatal health, child development, family dynamics, and problem solving.

Evaluations of MIHOW show how these parents can affect the lives of families:

- Parental empowerment: Participating families are more likely than their peers to know how to find affordable medical care (81 percent vs. 62 percent), transportation to medical care (84 percent vs. 62 percent), and assistance with alcoholism, drug abuse, and depression (72 percent vs. 46 percent).
- Improved prenatal health behavior: Participating mothers consumed more vitamins and iron and less tobacco and caffeine during pregnancy. They received more medical visits and were more likely to breastfeed (33 percent vs. 23 percent).
- Child development: On a commonly used child development scale, participating families scored significantly higher than the comparison group across the board.

08

Transforming Rural America Through Technology

In addition to making distance learning and telemedicine possible, technology has helped to offset the problems of isolation and lack of transportation.

- Technology offers the possibility of telecommuting to work, and as a result, expands the number of jobs available to rural residents. It has also enabled rural entrepreneurs to open businesses that reach a worldwide market.
- Technology can reduce the number of visits families make to distant offices in order to obtain benefits. For example, the Navajo Nation is testing a customized automated case management and tracking system that links caseworkers from 12 welfare offices by satellite so they can determine a person's eligibility for multiple programs simultaneously.

Unfortunately, many rural families and communities lack this technology. To remedy this problem, public-private partnerships have offered innovative ways to address specific technological needs:

- **PowerUP!** offers disadvantaged young Americans an opportunity to gain technological skills, experiences, and resources. Operating where young people gather, PowerUP! gives local partners the funding to hire savvy adult mentors to operate the centers, which provide Gateway computers, Hewlett Packard printers, AOL accounts, network switches and routers donated by Cisco Systems, computer training, and children's programming.
- A collaboration between the University of California San Diego and the Southern California Tribal Chairman's Association — an organization of 18 tribes in the San Diego area — is testing broadband wireless technologies in hopes of finding a solution to the networking needs of Indian Country. Initially supported by the National Science Foundation, the project was awarded a $5 million grant from Hewlett-Packard to build a **"Digital Village."** The flexible grant enables tribes to choose how best to use the money to help them move forward with technology.
- To stop the outward migration of youth, the city of Crete, Nebraska, and a coalition involving a local school, a community action agency, Doane College, and a cable company created **"Access for a Better Crete."** This program promotes intergenerational lifetime learning by arranging mentoring between students and the elderly. The project includes Cardinal Computers, a business developed by students and technology teachers, which has allowed the students to build computers for the hospital, county commissioners, and others in the community.

Children at Big Ugly Community Center, Big Ugly, West Virginia

Children on the Navajo Reservation, Nenahnezad, New Mexico

Photo by Bob Winsett

The AmeriCorps National Service Program

When rural organizations need full-time help to create new programs and services, mobilize part-time volunteers, provide direct service to children, and otherwise assist in their efforts to improve their communities, they often turn to AmeriCorps, a federal program administered by the Corporation for National and Community Service. AmeriCorps members may be adults of any age or background who serve full- or part-time for a year or more in exchange for a modest living allowance and education award of approximately $5,000 per year of service. This award has made it possible for thousands of rural residents to pursue higher education. Rural communities have used AmeriCorps members to develop tutoring and mentoring programs, conduct outreach to families with young children, and create collaborations among local groups and businesses. AmeriCorps members may also be professionals who work in areas that have difficulty attracting providers with their skills. Encompassing VISTA, the National Civilian Community Corps (modeled on the Depression-era Civilian Conservation Corps), and a grants program that supports national, state, and local groups, AmeriCorps fills the need for flexible human capital in rural communities across the country.

Create New Community Institutions

Create and strengthen comprehensive community centers and other places that serve children and youth.

- Support the development of community centers for poor rural communities that are located in places that:
    - are easy to reach in the community;
    - offer programs and services that reflect the local culture; and
    - offer a comprehensive range of services for children and families, including child development/ early learning programs from birth (such as Head Start and Early Head Start), youth programs, and other services.
- Make funding for after-school and summer youth programs a high priority.
- Encourage community partnerships that make a broad range of children's health services available in places that are easily reached by families.
- Support efforts to enhance the quality of education provided by small rural schools and reconsider policies that have forced them to close.
- Offer young people the chance to build relationships with seniors, including Foster Grandparents.

Discussion

All children from birth through adolescence should have access to the services they need to ensure their healthy development. But too often, these services are unavailable or inaccessible to rural families. A primary strategy to address this problem should be creating centers or other places in the community that can offer a broad range of services that families need, whether it's a Head Start program, a safe place with constructive activities and tutoring for children when they are not in school, mentoring programs, or adult literacy programs.

Support the development of community centers for poor rural communities.

Too many rural areas have no public places where the community can gather and providers can offer convenient access to services that families need. Schools can sometimes serve this purpose, but many isolated rural areas are served by schools that are miles away. Rural areas often have no libraries, no recreational centers, and no other public facilities that could provide a physical home for these services. Most have churches or other faith-based facilities, but some may not have enough space for comprehensive facilities. Some organizations, such as Libraries for the Future, are working to help fill this void, but more resources are needed.

In addition to the physical home, a lead organization is needed to apply for public and private funding, develop partnerships with other organizations that can bring services to the centers, and otherwise provide the leadership to use the space in ways that have the most positive impact on the community. This organization should involve the whole community in planning the center to assess what services are most needed. They could include learning centers, libraries, technology centers, preventive health care, parent support, substance abuse prevention and treatment, support groups for children of substance abusers, homework help and tutoring, community service opportunities, and teen pregnancy prevention programs. Combining services can make the services not only easier to access, but more efficient as a result of improved coordination, shared resources, and streamlined administration.

Rural communities can stretch their limited resources (including transportation) by making community centers intergenerational and including programs such as adult education and ESL classes, services for seniors, space for libraries and computer centers, and recreation. By offering a space for community functions, from a teen dance to a political debate, these centers strengthen the ties that bind communities together.

While the Federal government funds many individual programs that could be incorporated into comprehensive community centers, the fragmented nature of this support requires that short-staffed rural organizations keep track of multiple programs in different agencies, fill out many different applications, and comply with a wide range of regulations. Funding is urgently needed for the building or renovation of facilities and for their operation, including "glue money" to facilitate program coordination. In addition, simplifying procedures that enable small organizations, including faith-based organizations with community service programs, to access to government funding from a range of funding streams should be a high priority.

Make funding for after-school and summer youth programs a high priority.

Children are most vulnerable after school, when they are often left alone and unsupervised. Juvenile crime triples in the hours from 3 p.m. to 8 p.m.[64] Drug and alcohol abuse and sexual activity resulting in teen pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases often occur.[65] Having a safe place to go after school, with caring adults and constructive activities, can significantly reduce these risky behaviors. After-school and summer programs also provide access to activities that build skills and self esteem, teach children about their cultural heritage, promote physical activity and recreation and improve academic performance.[66] Funding for these programs has increased significantly in the last few years, primarily through the Department of Education's 21st Century Learning Center Program, which was recently expanded as part of the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. This legislation gives states the option of allowing community organizations to compete directly for after-school funding — an important change that could enable remote communities that are far from schools to offer programs during out-of-school time. Although funding has increased for after-school programs, many remote communities still do not have them. More attention needs to be given to ensure that all rural children and young people have access to these programs so they can benefit from their resources and opportunities.

Encourage community partnerships that make a broad range of children's health services available in places that are easily reached by families.

Because access to health care is so important, health services should be offered in places where children and their families gather — including community centers, child care programs, and schools. This will require that health care providers and children's organizations work together to develop a children's health services plan for the community. Ideally, eligible children should be enrolled in State Child Health Insurance Program (SCHIP) through their schools, child care programs, or outreach directly to families. Access to providers could be facilitated through clinics, traveling nurses, doctors, and dentists; telemedicine, mobile vans, or transportation programs to take the children to the providers. Nutrition, mental health services, substance abuse prevention and treatment, and support groups for children who have experienced violence or whose parents are substance abusers are important, but too often neglected, components of community health services plans.

Support efforts to enhance the quality of education provided by small rural schools and reconsider policies that have forced them to close.

Schools are an important institution in the life of a child, but bias, distance, and substandard education characterize the school experience of many rural children. Keeping open small schools in rural communities and working to improve them is critical to addressing these problems. By locating additional services (such as infant day care and health clinics) at schools, their cost effectiveness as community institutions can be increased.

Offer young people the chance to build relationships with seniors.

Finally, even the poorest communities have an important resource for children and youth — their senior citizens. Opportunities for young people to build relationships with older people are one benefit of intergenerational community centers. Senior volunteer programs directed at helping children do better academically have positive effects on both the volunteers and the children they tutor. An added benefit is that the senior volunteers help young people build self-esteem by encouraging them to learn more about their history and culture.

Meeting Needs in the Mississippi Delta

The Boys, Girls, Adults Community Development Center (BGACDC) in Marvell, Arkansas, plays a vital role in one of the Delta's most economically distressed areas. BGACDC offers myriad services, including child care (with transportation), Home Instruction Program for Preschool Youngsters (HIPPY), after-school programs, tutoring, a parenting center, a youth recreational center, a library, adult education and training, support programs for fathers, summer day camp, a home repair training program, a restaurant, and a health care unit that provides immunizations, well-baby exams, and screening for diabetes and hypertension. The agency views itself as a facilitator, linking service providers to ensure that they meet the needs of children.

Even with its central place in the community, significant needs, and proven ability to benefit children and families, BGACDC currently faces tough times. After more than 20 years, it is experiencing its toughest fight ever to raise funds, demonstrating that even well-run, effective organizations in rural communities struggle to survive.

Marvell, Arkansas

Photo by Kate Lapides

BOYS, GIRLS, ADULTS
COMMUNITY
DEVELOPMENT CENTER
B.G.A.C.D.C.
"People United to Save Children"
Est. 1978

Foster Grandparents Support Children

The Corporation for National and Community Service's Foster Grandparent Program mobilizes an often-overlooked resource: seniors. Foster Grandparents tutor children in reading, offer emotional support to children who have been abused or neglected, and mentor teenagers and young mothers. Their one-on-one attention helps these young people gain the confidence they need to succeed. In the process, Foster Grandparents strengthen communities by providing services they cannot afford and by building bridges across generations.

Many Foster Grandparents find that the experience not only helps children but also improves their own lives. Lula Rhea Smith is a Foster Grandparent at the Fentress Community Center in Clarkrange, Tennessee, where she spends 20 hours a week helping children improve their reading and writing skills. She reflects: "*Last year my husband died, my son moved away, and I broke my ankle. I was totally depressed, and I just ate and ate and I gained about 35 pounds. I thought my life was over. I knew that I needed to get into something to get my mind off of myself and my problems. That's when I became a Foster Grandparent. And these kids are wonderful! This opportunity has given me a new outlook on life. One of the children I work with is little Timmy. He's in third grade, and he's such a sweetheart. He can't write real well. I just take his hand and help him make his little letters. Whenever he does something on his own, he'd say, 'Miss LuRhea, am I smart?' I'd say, 'Yes, sweetie, you certainly are.'*"

Photo by Bob Winsett

Lula Rhea Smith, Foster Grandparent, helps with reading at the Fentress Community Center, Clarkrange, Tennessee

Caring Adults (Human Capital) and Community Centers (Community Institutions): Two Model Programs

REALIZING DREAMS IN WEST VIRGINIA

Big Ugly Creek, an isolated, persistently poor community that has invested in its children, shows the importance of civic space and caring adults in children's lives.

When its elementary school was forced to close in 1995, the community was devastated. Students' grades and discipline plummeted at the consolidated school, an hour's drive across a switch backed mountain road. The community had lost its only public space in a county that already had no recreation programs, movie theaters, or public swimming pools.

Under the leadership of former Kellogg Fellow Michael Tierney, parents organized to get control of the school building. After a two-year fight, they won the battle to lease and then purchase the old building for one dollar, and then established the Big Ugly Community Center. Volunteers hauled water from their homes to scrub the mold off the walls of the neglected and vandalized building. In three months, the center opened its doors.

Children come to the center to participate in structured activities, including West Virginia Dreamers, sponsored by the nonprofit organization, Step by Step, an innovative after-school and summer program. Each year, the young people declare one dream they want to pursue, and program coordinators work with each child to help turn it into reality. Whether their goal is to take fiddle lessons, go whitewater rafting, act in a play, or make the world's biggest pancake, the children stretch themselves and their families to achieve their goal.

The program is governed by a few core principles. First, children stay in the program until they graduate from high school, ensuring that skills and behaviors are reinforced over time. Second, a group of adults make a long-term commitment to work with the children. (Some of these adults have gone on to join AmeriCorps and are taking leadership roles, designing new programs and activities.) Third, the value of hope and the encouragement to go after dreams are central to all parts of the program.

According to Tierney, the director of Step by Step, "Parents in this community are used to hearing only negative things about their kids. One of the biggest benefits of the program is that now there are other adults interested in these kids and it builds a profile of the kids with teachers and parents that hadn't existed before." Adults involved with the children report that the young people develop greater self-esteem, school connectedness, and an active vision; these observations are backed by research supported by the Pew Partnership "Wanted: Solutions for America" program. The Dreamers program has now been adopted by other community groups in the coal fields.

The synergy created by the community investment in its children has led to a full continuum of community education programs, including playgroups, GED classes, a teen jobs program, and family reunions that attract as many as 200 people. Step by Step's nonprofit status has served as a vehicle for the community to win national competitions for arts, service-learning, and after-school grants.

"When a community comes together, even the most isolated and beaten-down communities can develop lasting resources," says Tierney.

Young people in West Virginia Dreamers Program, Big Ugly, West Virginia

REVERSING THE "BRAIN DRAIN" ON THE BORDER

"Community development can't happen without youth development," according to Francisco Guajardo, a teacher and founder of the Llano Grande Center, which serves the border towns of Edcouch and Elsa, Texas — the second poorest area in the state. Although 90 percent of the households in these towns have an income of less than $10,000 and 9 out of 10 parents don't have high school diplomas, Guajardo and the center have helped more than 35 students attend Ivy League colleges over a six-year period. Even more extraordinary — many of these students have returned to the community after graduation.

Guajardo himself grew up poor in one of the unincorporated colonias, and he recalls vividly what it was like to start first grade in the United States as a Mexican immigrant who spoke no English. Returning to the community after college to teach, Guajardo saw the need for its young people to have higher goals — and the support to help them get there.

The center, formally established in 1997 with support from the Annenberg Rural Challenge, today offers students a range of leadership opportunities. In addition to its high school advising program, which includes visits to elite colleges, the center sponsors an institute to build young people's media skills and organizes a series of seminars through which students, teachers, and community members discuss many important issues. It has also supported the students' production of a documentary film about the community.

The center's success has attracted State Farm Insurance as a corporate partner; the company provides not just dollars but program advice. Another business partner, Houston's Telesurvey Research Associates, trains the staff and students in survey and research skills, enabling them to use complex statistical software to analyze local needs from housing to education and technology. The center has become a strong force in the community and a critical player in designing education policy in the Edcouch-Elsa High School.

Strengthen the Economic Self-Sufficiency of Families

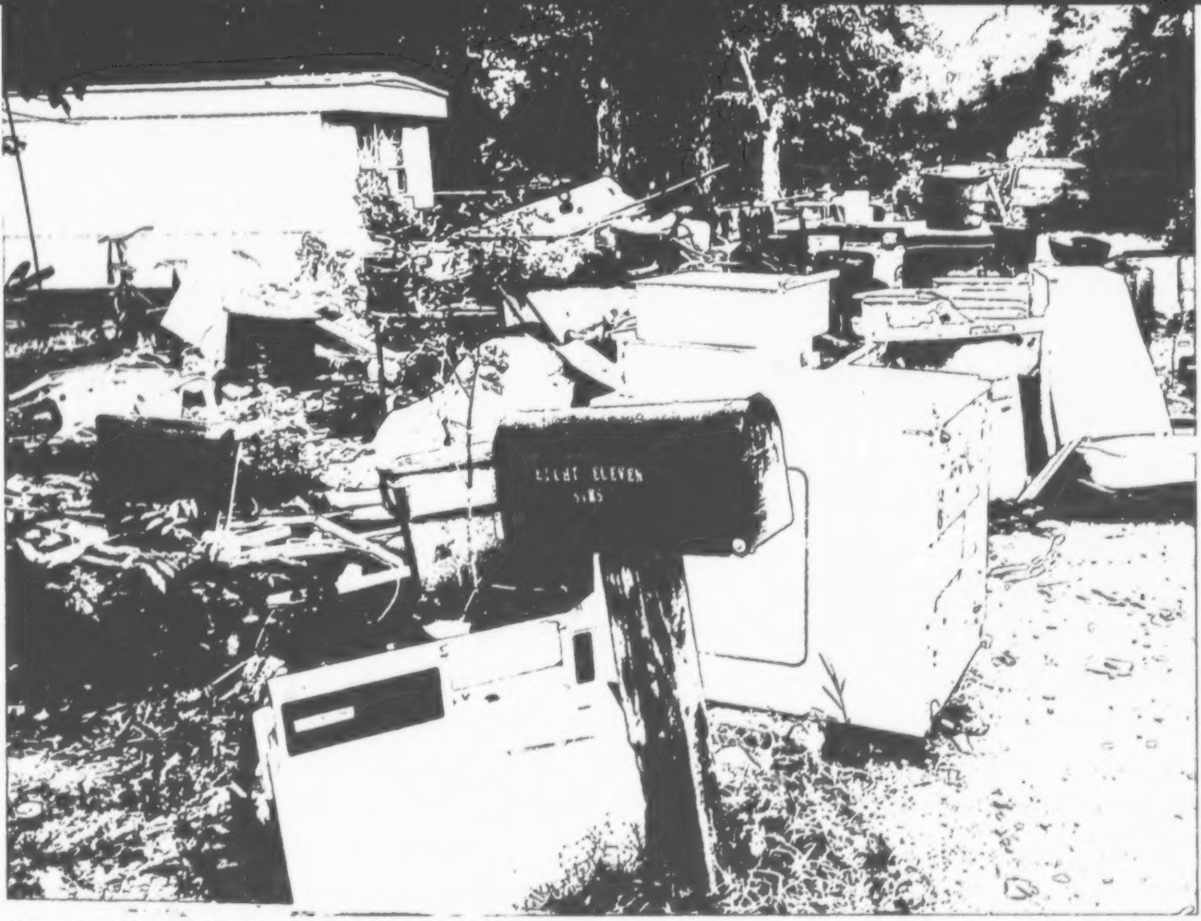
Ensure that welfare-to-work and other policies make the needs of children a priority.

- Ensure that public assistance, welfare to work, and work support programs take into account the circumstances faced by rural families, including those who work in low-wage jobs, by:
  - making child well being an explicit goal and measuring success based on a realistic standard for self-sufficiency rather than the poverty line;
  - providing benefits to low-income working families to help them improve their standard of living;
  - taking into account the special circumstances of families in remote rural areas with few jobs; elderly grandparents caring for their grandchildren; and families with barriers to employment such as lack of English literacy, lack of work experience, and substance abuse addiction.
  - providing full benefits to legal immigrants; and
  - simplifying administration of assistance programs for low-income families to ensure that every poor family eligible for nutrition, health, housing, child care, and other assistance receives it.
- Create permanent jobs that pay a living wage and offer benefits. Base these efforts on community-wide planning aided by technical assistance, access to capital, and other outside help.
- Make it easier for low-income families to save for specific goals.
- Expand the options for good, affordable childcare for rural families with the highest percentages of child poverty by:
  - enhancing the safety and developmental benefits of care provided by family members or friends;
  - supporting the development of child care centers located at the workplace, in schools, and community centers; and
  - supporting the organizations that help to build supply and access to quality child care.
- Provide reliable transportation options.
- Discourage teen pregnancy and keep teen mothers in school by investing in proven programs.

Discussion

Children are among those most affected by the nation's public assistance policies. Welfare reform changed the character of public assistance from an entitlement to a system to move individuals from welfare to work, and with the strong economy of the late 1990s, welfare rates fell dramatically. But as seen earlier, in too many cases, rural children whose parents work remain in poverty. Recent Child Trends research shows that when parents of young children left welfare for work, the results were mixed. But when adolescents were affected, the impacts were always unfavorable. Increased substance abuse and school behavior problems, followed by school suspension and expulsion were far more likely among adolescent children of welfare-leavers than for children of current welfare recipients,[67] which suggests that much more information is needed to understand the implications of public assistance policy on children. Fundamentally, these policies should give the well being of children no less weight than parental work status as measures of success.

Poor rural children are more likely to have working parents and less likely to receive public assistance than their urban counterparts. Rural families are hampered in their efforts to become self-sufficient because there are few good jobs where they live, there is a shortage of safe, affordable child care, and they lack access to reliable transportation. Rural parents are often forced to take jobs that pay little and offer no benefits. As a result, families are forced to choose among food, health care, and shelter, leaving their children without basic necessities:



Home in Quitman County, Mississippi

Photo by Kate Lapides

- Poor rural children are less likely than urban children to have health insurance, putting them at greater risk for no access to medical care, delays in necessary treatment, and inadequate preventive care, including immunizations.
- Low wages also place children at higher risk for hunger and malnutrition. While working families may be eligible for Food Stamps, the rules make it hard for them to maintain their eligibility.
- Finally, in some communities low wages and a shortage of housing mean that poor families spend the same percentage of their income on shelter as do families in New York City.

It is not surprising that over the last decade the number of families that "double up," with two families forming a single household, has increased dramatically in rural areas. In fact, grandparents and other relatives are increasingly taking over childrearing responsibilities for parents who cannot care for their children.

"Somebow you got to pay your bills, and you got to say, 'Are you going to have food, or are you going to have recreation?' and you can't have recreation if you can't pay your bills. I had to make a decision between cooking for my kids, getting a job, getting Medicaid. You have to make a decision about what areas need the money more."

— Minnie Woods, single mother in Mississippi. Although she has earned two associate degrees from the local community college, Minnie Woods earns only $6.25 an hour at the local fish pond. Unable to pay for reliable child care and having no transportation, she has at times been forced to leave her five younger children in the care of her 12-year-old daughter.

Ensure that public assistance, welfare-to-work, and work support programs take into account the circumstances faced by rural families, including those who work in low-wage jobs.

The policies and programs directed at moving families from welfare to work should address the special circumstances of families in remote rural areas. Too many rural families cannot support themselves through work because their economies and community support systems are weak. In addition to the lack of jobs, child care, and transportation, weaknesses in the school systems and community support systems that prepare individuals for work limit the employment possibilities for many of these families.

Where few jobs exist, wages are low and it is hard for families to become self-sufficient through work. When jobs pay so poorly, families can't afford reliable child care or transportation. Families that need help in order to become employable — such as job training or English as a Second Language classes — find that their communities do not offer such services. Because of such factors as these, a large number of rural families currently on welfare will soon "hit the time limits," and without exemptions and extensions, they and their children are at significant risk of being left with no income support and no jobs.

Public assistance policy should not penalize families unable to find work if none is available in their communities. Nor should families with multiple barriers to employment such as lack of English literacy, lack of work experience, children with disabilities, or substance abuse addiction, be penalized, especially where community support systems are weak. Benefits should be available on a nondiscriminatory basis to legal immigrants, and low-income working families should be able to continue to receive benefits until they are able to support themselves through work, based on realistic measures, such as self-sufficiency standards now in place in many states. Program administration should be simplified to ensure that every poor family eligible for nutrition, health, housing, child care, and other assistance receives it.

Most important, programs should provide resources to enable isolated rural communities to build systems that help families support themselves through work. When families face multiple and complex barriers to work, as so many rural families do, creative, flexible solutions are needed in response. Working systems that move families from welfare to work require coordination among employers, education institutions, local and state government, and community organizations, along with new resources to expand services and create jobs. Efforts to build better systems should be broadly based, involving employers, nonprofit organizations, children's service providers, educators, faith-based organizations, and others who can contribute toward this goal.

Create permanent jobs that pay a living wage and offer benefits. Base these efforts on community-wide planning aided by technical assistance, access to capital, and other outside help.

Good jobs are the cornerstone of the economic and community development needed for the well being of children, the elimination of "brain drain," and the attraction of skilled professionals and businesses to a region. In the past, job creation efforts have emphasized attracting companies to the area with mixed results. Even when successful, this strategy still carries the risk that an "outside" company will in time wield too much influence in the community and that tax incentives used in attracting the business will undermine the already weak tax base in the area. Promising strategies include:

Homes on the Navajo Reservation, Huerfano, New Mexico

Photo by Bob Winsett

- Stimulating the creation or expansion of small businesses through micro enterprise (small loans to individuals to start small, often home-based businesses) and business incubators (organizations that provide technical assistance and other support).
- Developing business "clusters" (a group of businesses near one another) and "sectors" (businesses that produce related products, use the same raw materials or technology, share a common market, or have other similarities).
- Promoting the growth of "homegrown" businesses by using telecommunications and Internet technology to give isolated entrepreneurs access to information, technical assistance, professional services, and expertise, as well as opportunities to build networks and links to customers.
- Providing venture capital to small businesses in targeted areas.
- Supporting the creation of new community jobs in the government or nonprofit sector. These positions could provide other services cited in this report, from health care outreach to rural development. In many rural communities, the public school is the largest employer, which illustrates the importance of jobs outside the for-profit sector.
- Expanding the number of areas that can be designated as empowerment zones and enterprise communities, and ensuring that they have access to grant funds to build their community support systems as well as their economy.

Make it easier for low-income families to save to achieve specific goals.

The ability to save increases the chances for getting an education, home owning a, and starting a small business; it is essential if families are to move out of poverty. Unfortunately, poor families not only have difficulty saving because their needs outstrip their income, they are also, in some states, limited because of "asset tests" in public assistance programs. Some states have addressed this issue by exercising an option under their welfare laws to create Individual Development Accounts (IDAs), which are exempt from tests that reduce aid based on a family's wealth and possessions. The best programs also provide matching amounts to augment a family's savings. All states should make IDAs available; private-sector funders should assist in providing matching amounts; and nonprofit organizations should provide counseling to help families manage their finances successfully.

Building Stronger Communities

Community empowerment is essential for successful rural development. The federally funded, inter-agency Empowerment Zones/Enterprise Communities program (EZ/EC) is intended to revitalize distressed and underserved urban and rural areas. It recognizes that the problems that distressed areas face are often interrelated and that communities know best how to tackle these problems. Community partnerships bring together residents, public-sector community organizations, and local business to make neighborhoods more viable places to live, work, and raise families. The combination of flexible financing, strategic planning, and accountability helps poor communities address structural problems in a comprehensive way.

Expand the options for good, affordable child care for families in rural areas with the highest percentages of child poverty.

As in urban areas, child care is necessary if parents are to have steady work. Compared with their urban and suburban counterparts, however, rural families have fewer child care choices. Three-fourths of rural children go to family day care homes, most of them "kith and kin" — care provided by friends or relatives, including older siblings.[68] While there is some evidence that many families prefer this type of care, transportation barriers, financial limitations, irregular work hours, and the lack of other care arrangements effectively limit their options. Informal care is more likely to be provided by untrained individuals, lack a developmental curriculum, and not be linked to other services for children.

An effort to improve the options for rural families should build on the existing resources, including family day care homes and youth programs, to create a network of providers that can offer a range of resources to children from birth through the teen years. This effort should enhance the safety and developmental benefits of "kith and kin" care and support the creation of child care centers to give parents more options by:

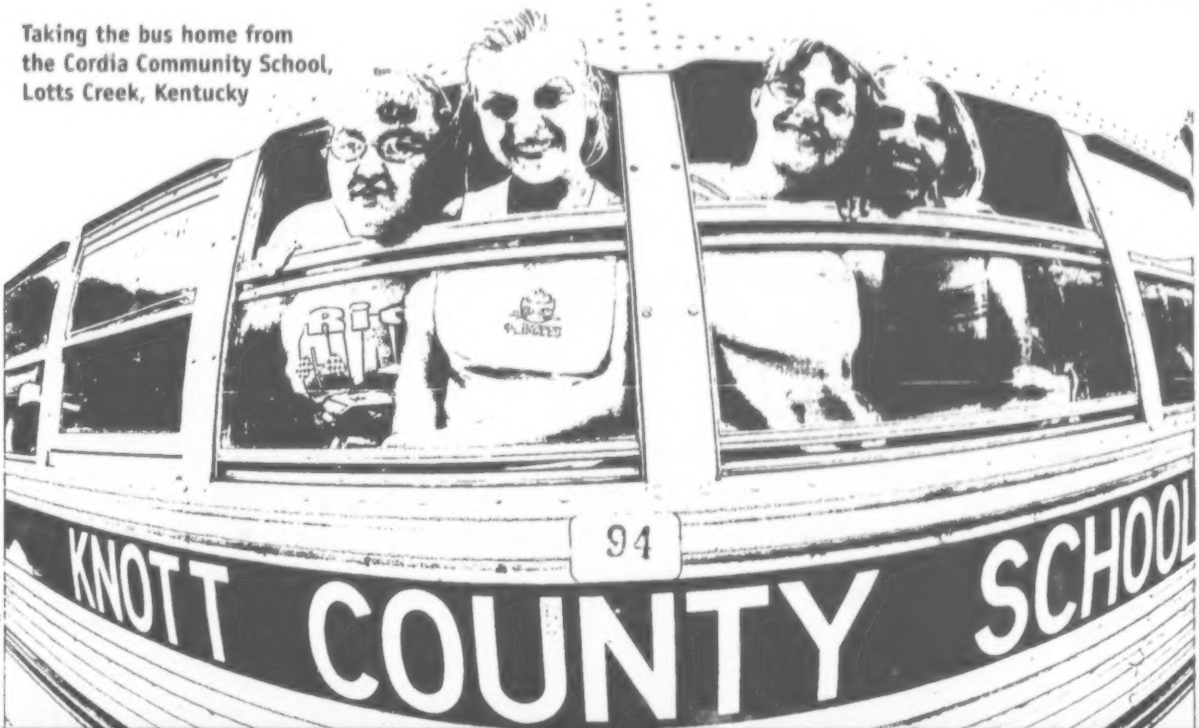
- Supporting "resource and referral agencies" in these communities, which help families find care and help providers improve the quality of their services;
- Distributing child care subsidies, not just through vouchers, but through grant funds targeted to build the supply of center-based care;
- Supporting the accreditation of rural child care programs;
- Supporting professional development for rural child care providers through distance-learning and other means;
- Addressing child care-related transportation issues; and
- Creating incentives for informal care providers to become licensed, including access to revolving loan funds for home improvements and higher payment rates through government programs.

Provide reliable transportation options.

The lack of public transportation presents a significant barrier to employment in rural areas. Although a car is essential for work and the daily life of most families, low wages put car ownership beyond the reach of many people. Furthermore, public assistance programs can require that cars owned by eligible families not exceed an extremely low value, which means that many families cannot receive benefits if they own a reliable car. For families to move out of poverty, creative solutions must be found to this problem, such as car sharing, vehicle ownership promotion programs, tax incentives for employers who provide transportation, and expanding the use of school buses and other existing transportation.

Photo by Bob Winsett

Taking the bus home from the Cordia Community School, Lotts Creek, Kentucky



Transforming Rural Transportation

Transportation is vital to many aspects of rural life, from getting to work and child care to reaching medical services or participating in after-school programs. Some states and localities have devised creative strategies to make their residents more mobile.

- School buses, Medicare vans, and senior citizen vans take adults to jobs and job training programs. In North Carolina, the school bus network provides transportation to low-income employees of local school systems. School employees are trained as bus monitors and may take the buses to their jobs.
- The Wheels to Work Program in Forsyth County, North Carolina, enables low-income individuals with no access to public transportation to buy vehicles. A collaboration between the County Social Services Department and Goodwill Industries brought together the county transportation office, the local transit authority, a local insurance company, a car dealer, and an attorney to develop the program. Participants reimburse Goodwill for the initial cost of liability insurance, repairs, taxes, and license and title fees and make monthly payments in exchange for full ownership at the year's end.
- In rural Covington County, Alabama, C.A.T.S.— the Covington Area Transit System — was created when the Department of Human Resources brought local officials together to address the issues that prevented many residents from getting to their JOBS program. C.A.T.S., a full-service transit agency, began with four 15-passenger vans. It has added two additional vans and one bus in recent years, including a vehicle for disabled passengers.
- Serving five rural Kentucky counties, the Big Sandy Vehicle Leasing Program is a partnership of several government agencies, nonprofit organizations, and a community college. It helps individuals lease a vehicle to help them make the transition from welfare to work. As part of the agreement, participants must agree to ongoing training on car maintenance and leasing or buying a vehicle. In addition, participants must agree to provide transportation to others who need it.

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Discourage teen pregnancy and keep teen mothers in school by investing in proven programs.

Because half of the current welfare recipients had their first child as teenagers, preventing teen pregnancy is an important strategy for reducing poverty and welfare dependency. Teen mothers are more likely to have dropped out of school and are less likely to be able to support themselves. Only 20 percent of teen mothers receive any support from their child's father, and about 80 percent end up on welfare.[69]

The children of teen mothers suffer too. They are more likely than the children of older mothers to be born prematurely and to suffer a variety of health problems as a result.[70] They are more likely to do poorly in school, to suffer higher rates of abuse and neglect, and to end up in foster care.[71]

According to the National Campaign for the Prevention of Teen Pregnancy, teenagers who have strong emotional attachments to their parents are much less likely to become sexually active at an early age.[72] Certain programs have also been shown to reduce teen pregnancy, including:

- Activities that promote school success. Students who feel a strong connection to their school and have higher grades are more likely to postpone sexual activity.
- Certain culturally sensitive sex and HIV education programs, which can decrease sexual activity among teens.
- Service-learning and other youth programs that can foster a sense of self in youth.

> ***"It's hard being a mom at sixteen. I mean, waking up in the middle of the night and stuff. I get no welfare, no nothing for the baby. My grandmother, she works, and my grandfather works to help me support the baby. And I get a little from his father. But it's so hard. I actually miss a lot of school because sometimes I don't have a babysitter when my grandmother can't watch him or he needs to go to the doctor or something. There's a lot of girls who get pregnant here and we have no day care in our school. And the public day care does not work for nothing. I mean, there's been so many complaints against that day care, I would NEVER leave Fernando there."***
>
> — Nikki Cano, 16 years old, Mendota, California

Nicki Cano and son, Fernando

Photo by Kate Lapides

Increase Resources to Eliminate Rural Poverty

Target and increase public and private investments specifically for the poorest rural children.

- Convene a White House Conference on Child Poverty in Rural America.
- Examine the needs of rural children and families, how they are affected by government policies and public and private programs, and how these programs could be more effective.
- Identify and address the most important policy changes that would help rural children and families, including opportunities for beneficial public-private partnerships and ways to combine funding streams to build a viable community support system.

Discussion

Public and private funding is available to assist rural areas as well as poor children and families. However, persistently poor communities and families living there often have difficulty obtaining these resources due to the structure of government and philanthropic programs and other factors.

Convene a White House Conference on Child Poverty in Rural America.

As we have seen in this report, children living in remote rural pockets of poverty are America's forgotten children. A White House conference will bring national attention to the dire situation of these children by convening leaders from Federal, state, and local government, tribes, corporations, foundations, nonprofit organizations, businesses, faith-based institutions, and schools, who could create the public-private partnerships that are essential to implement the strategies needed to end rural child poverty. White House conferences have frequently been the catalyst for change in this country in the past, and there is no greater cause than the well being of our nation's future – our children.

Examine the needs of rural children and families, how they are affected by government policies and public and private programs, and how these programs could be more effective.

Many federal programs that could help rural communities can fund only a fraction of eligible applicants. Insufficient funding may force poor rural areas to compete with those communities that are better off and thus able to craft better applications. Priorities or set-asides for persistently poor rural areas can help ensure that the funds reach those who need it most. The poorest rural areas may also be disproportionately affected by policies that consolidate public schools, force rural hospitals to close, or shut down government offices serving small communities. Patterns of regulatory enforcement also may have a negative effect on rural areas — where environmental or anti-discrimination laws are not enforced, rural communities have little recourse when they experience adverse effects.

To remedy these problems, public and private funders at all levels should examine their policies and programs to determine how effectively they serve children and families in persistently poor rural areas. This process should:

- Focus principally on children and families that have experienced the highest levels of child poverty over the last decade;
- Identify specific needs that are not being met;
- Determine which programs can address those needs;
- Assess the effectiveness of these programs;
- Consider what has worked well in similar communities; and
- Determine where poor rural communities are being hurt by policies and patterns of regulatory enforcement.

This process should be well funded, and if possible, include professional staff or expert volunteers, involve both government and the private sector, and allow for broadly based input from poor rural communities in the jurisdiction. At the Federal and state levels, for example, entities that involve multiple government agencies as well as private organizations, such as the National and State Rural Development Councils, could conduct this examination and institute an ongoing "impediments process" (like the one set up by the National Rural Development Partnership) to enable citizens to call attention to policies that hurt rural areas.

> ***"These towns in the valley are gold mines for grants. And anytime that the wealthy, predominantly white community nearby needs a grant, the grant application is built on the needs of the valley towns to increase the chances of its being funded. Yet, we never get the money. When the money comes in, the things we applied for never get done. You see that the parks in the valley towns are abandoned. If you go to the white communities, there are beautiful green parks. Both communities have the same parks administration. Stuff like this happens all the time."***
>
> — Central California School Board Member

Identify and address the most important policy changes to help rural children and families, including opportunities for beneficial public-private partnerships and ways to combine funding streams to build a viable community support system.

To serve the poorest areas more effectively, policymakers and funders should address identified problems in three ways. First, efforts to help should be sensitive to a community's cultural, geographic, and demographic issues and be flexible enough to enable it to craft solutions that work in its unique context.

Second, bridges between these rural communities and external support must be built — and barriers removed — so the areas can receive the specific help they need, whether it's creating jobs or improving the schools. The solution might involve changing policies that work to the disadvantage of rural applicants, creating better-targeted funding streams or preferences for these areas, or technical assistance to improve rural organizations' chances for obtaining funding.

Third, decision-makers should make it easier for rural communities to combine funding streams to strengthen the overall community support systems — such as a shared transportation system, common intake process for public assistance programs, or single site where multiple services can be accessed.

Storefront in Mississippi

Photo by Kate Lapides

Home in the Central California Valley

Photo by Kate Lapides

Rethinking Investments in California

California's Central Valley holds 13 of the nation's 101 poorest communities. Yet, in a state known for its philanthropy, it has received little foundation support. "Before foundations can invest money in a region, they need to make sure organizations there have the full capacity to make good use of it," explains the James Irvine Foundation's recently retired CEO, Dennis Collins. The foundation has stepped forward to help build that capacity by strengthening organizations, developing leaders, and boosting the nonprofit sector across the entire region.

A central part of its effort is an investment of nearly $10 million to address the needs of the Central Valley's growing population of young people. Topping the list of grants is a $6 million investment to support the Great Valley Center in Modesto as it strengthens its role as a major anchor in the region. The grant will support its efforts to help develop the effective nonprofit organizations, skilled leadership, and strong communities that are central to the well-being of the region's youth and all its residents. Other grants went to Save the Children for after-school programs, the Hispanic Scholarship Fund, and the Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning for teachers' professional development.

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Conclusion

America's Forgotten Children: Child Poverty in Rural America was written to raise national awareness about the problem of child poverty in rural areas and to offer solutions to improve the lives of the children who live there.

Every sector of society has an important role to play in building effective community support systems for the 2.5 million rural children who live in poverty. Federal, state, and local government, tribes, corporations, foundations, nonprofit organizations, community leaders, business leaders, faith-based institutions, and schools must work together to create public-private partnerships that will take a close look at what needs to be done, recommend innovative changes to existing programs and funding streams, and invest the needed public and private dollars. We ask those individuals and institutions who can do so to make it a priority to enable the forgotten children of rural America to realize their hopes and dreams.

Appendix A

The Blue Ribbon Panel on Rural Child Poverty

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Rebeca Barrera
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Appendix B

Data and Definitions

The research for this report is based on data from three primary sources: the annual Demographic Supplements of the Current Population Survey (CPS) and the Census Bureau's Small Area Income and Poverty Estimates (SAIPE), and information from the 2000 Census.

Much of our analyses of child poverty trends is based on pooled data from the March CPS, 1988–2000. Each March demographic supplement includes nationally representative information on the civilian, non-institutional population in approximately 60,000 housing units. For our purposes, we link data records for children under age 18 in the CPS to social, demographic, and economic data on children's co-residential parents and other adults (e.g., age, parental education, work status). This allows us to tabulate and evaluate the changing percentage of children living with two parents, a working parent, or young parents, among other analyses.

The CPS classifies metro areas as one or more economically integrated counties that meet specific population thresholds (e.g., including a large [central] city of 50,000 or more). Nonmetro is a residual geographical category. In 2000, the Census Bureau estimated a nonmetro population of roughly 55 million, or 20 percent of the US population. For our purposes, we use nonmetro and rural interchangeably.

Poverty income thresholds are based on annual money income in the calendar year that preceded the March CPS interview. How best to measure poverty has been a topic of much debate. The official poverty income threshold (for families of various sizes) can be criticized on a number of counts: it miscalculates family economies of scale (i.e., equivalence scales); it fails to take into account in-kind government transfers (e.g., food stamps); it does not account for geographic variations in cost of living or consumption; it is based on family rather than household income; and it does not adjust for taxes or other nonconsumption expenditures, such as child support payments. How such issues distort rural-urban comparisons is difficult to tell, although the evidence suggests that the cost of living is lower in rural areas, if housing costs are adjusted. Our analyses are based on the official poverty measure, which is the basis of eligibility for a number of government programs and is available annually in the March CPS files.

The CPS is useful for examining recent trends in poverty among rural and urban children in the United States. It is less useful for identifying poverty in depressed areas or regions. To this end, the Census Bureau's SAIPE program provides model-based county estimates of child poverty in 1989 and 1997. The program also provides updated estimates of income and poverty statistics for the administration of federal programs and the allocation of federal funds to local jurisdictions. These estimates are not based on actual counts of poor people. Instead, they are derived from statistical models of the relation between poverty and tax and program data from states (and, in some cases, counties) from the CPS. The statistical model is then used to estimate poverty rates in all counties in the United States. We use these estimates to identify counties with the highest child poverty rates and to describe their social and demographic characteristics (e.g., regional location, percent minority, etc.).

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Save the Children, founded in 1932 to help children and families in Appalachia, is a global nonprofit, child-assistance organization serving 12 million children and adults in more than 40 countries worldwide, as well as 18 states in the United States. Its mission is to make lasting, positive change in the lives of children in need. Save the Children is also a member of the International Save the Children Alliance, a global network of 30 independent Save the Children organizations in more than 100 countries.

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